

# I LOVED YOU WEDNESDAY



A NOVEL BY

# DAVID MARLOW

Steve is a struggling actor, living in New York with his two bull-dogs, Ruth and Harry (one is prone to fits). Chris too is an aspiring actress, beautiful, depressive, dedicated to the notion of 'being in love', and she lives with a succession of men (also prone to fits). Steve is her comforter, listener, confessor and friend ; he feeds her, cheers her and sees her through every crisis. And he also falls in love with her.

The discovery that Bradley, her lover, is married, leaves Chris in a familiar state of depression, and Steve, as always, cheers and supports her. Inevitably she progresses to the other state familiar to her and falls in love with Steve. But her love is lethal, she unconsciously builds only to destroy. As a friend and outsider Steve is well equipped to deal with all this ; as her lover he can't cope. Slowly, sadly, superbly, their relationship works its way to the inevitable but shocking climax.

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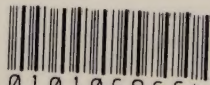
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# I LOVED YOU

A NOVEL BY



# WEDNESDAY

*David Marlow*

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*This is for you, Grace*





*And if I loved you Wednesday,  
Well, what is that to you?  
I do not love you Thursday—  
So much is true.*

—EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY  
"Thursday"



# OVERTURE





If you really want to get depressed, read on.

I suppose if anyone's equipped to tell you about doldrums, it must be me. As it turns out, I've become practically an expert on the subject.

But no matter.

For the true hands-down champ of depression must be my friend Chris who sinks even lower than me. So much so that I, by comparison, seem euphoric. And since this is her story, you may as well know right from the beginning that Chris once got so depressed she tried committing suicide in my apartment while I was away.

It happened last January, almost a year ago.

I was home packing, getting ready to be picked up by a friend to drive to Stowe for a long anticipated week of skiing. I was going, right after that, into a Broadway comedy called *Mrs. Bartlett Is Engaged*, in which I'd gotten a small part. Since the show was to be in rehearsal six weeks before the tryout in Boston, this was my last chance to get away.

Chris, meanwhile, had been living with a self-centered fashion model named Hank for six months, and they'd just broken up. Which was kind of too bad, I remember thinking; they sure looked good together walking down the street.

In fact, between the two of them, they could just about stop traffic.

Chris is quite stunning. Soft auburn hair, extraordinarily

huge dark-green eyes, the most inviting smile and one knockout of a body. It all unifies, not as cold "actress" beauty, but rather with the priceless added gift of radiated warmth and instantly obvious vulnerability as well.

When nature goes out of its way to be kind, everything works.

And it certainly worked wonders for Hank, what with his strong, brooding good looks, oceans of wavy hair and those charismatic cold steel baby blues, which made up in calculated charm and devastation what they lacked in compassion.

He was perfect bait for Chris to flip for and fall in love with.

And she was perfect bait for him to build up and destroy.  
Which is exactly what he did.

Anyway, the phone rings, and it is Chris. Very upset.

She tells me she has taken an apartment but can't move in till next Tuesday, the first of the month. And Hank, with whom she has just broken up and with whom tensions are riding high, says it's okay if she stays with him in his apartment until then, "as long as you don't get in the way."

Since my apartment will be vacant for the week, I suggest Chris tell Hank to stick his greater-than-thou airs and move into my place until hers is available. All she has to do is water my plants and tend to my two English bulldogs, Harry and Ruth.

To which she agrees.

So.

I am soon on my way to Vermont with great visions of skiing my buns off in a foot of new powder. Chris moves all her luggage into my place, including her usual arsenal of pills.

She unpacks.

She changes into jeans.

She feeds the dogs.

She cooks herself a frozen Stouffer's spinach soufflé and then decides not to eat it.

She does her tarot cards, which speak of new beginnings, and is immediately overwhelmed by fear, frustration and



anxiety. Her first instinct, like a man watching himself drowning, is to call someone.

But whom?

I'm en route. Which eliminates me.

Her mother, in Seattle, where it is three hours earlier, is out shopping and doesn't answer her call. Which is just as well. They're rarely in touch anyway.

Which leaves Hank.

Who happens to be home when she calls.

Which is too bad.

Hank tells Chris he's sorry if she's low, but each of them has his own life to live now, so let's not keep any scenes lingering on. "That would be in bad taste." He apologizes for not being able to speak with her any longer, but the guys are over, playing poker, you know. Maybe he'll run into her on a commercial call or something, huh?

They hang up, and Chris decides she no longer cares to go on with this thing called life. And in the total sweeping commitment of that particular moment, there is no alternative to be weighed.

She swallows a nearly full bottle of Valium, a bunch of ups, a couple downs, and then washes the whole goo down with half a fifth of my gin. The whole mixture is so volatile, in fact, it causes her to throw up almost before ingestion begins. And as weariness and exhaustion begin to settle in, the thought of giving back her cookies as she fades so disturbs her image of an idyllic death scene she throws herself into reverse and decides to be saved.

Dialing the emergency police number, 911, she waits a good thirteen rings before they answer.

By the time they finally do say hello, all she can summon is the strength to say she is dying, gives my address and then hangs up.

Since she has neglected to mention she is ODing and not being murdered, all the Emergency Squad knows is that someone is dying over at my place. So they send out an all-points notice until four screeching police cars, their sirens blaring asunder the quiet, cold night, arrive downstairs, breaking to sudden halts.

No time for ringing the bell. The emergency men break down my door, get to Chris, cart her out on a stretcher and bring her to the hospital, where her stomach is pumped and her life saved within something like ten minutes.

At about the same time, I've just ended a long six-hour trip to Vermont. I arrive, exchange hellos with my friends, Maggie and Douglas, and begin to unwind and settle down when the phone rings.

And it is Marie, my downstairs neighbor, calling to say that whoever was staying in my apartment was just carted off on a stretcher, unconscious, and what do I know about it?

*What do I know about it?*

Marie tells me the name of the hospital to which my houseguest was taken, and I thank her, hang up, call the hospital and speak to some conscientious nurse, who systematically fills me in as to how many centimeters they've pumped out of Chris so far. I inform Florence Nightingale I'll be leaving for New York at once.

Both Douglas and Maggie drive me to the airport at Burlington, where I catch the last flight leaving at nine forty-five.

An hour later I grab a taxi from LaGuardia and go straight to St. Vincent's Hospital, which is a good place to visit your best friend if you really feel like having a good cry.

Bureaucracy reigns supreme here, and it takes me half an hour just to find out where she is. Finally, I'm sent to the intensive care unit and Chris' room.

A nurse leads me in to see her: "Only for a moment or so; she's still asleep." And there lies my baby, snoring like one of my bulldogs. Tubes everywhere: up her nose, in her arms, a catheter draining her wastes.

Not a pretty sight.

I've been running without stopping for nine hours and suddenly realize I shouldn't be handling this horror alone. I ought to share the experience with Hank, who has obviously put her here in the first place. So I call, interrupting his poker game, and tell him what has happened.

He doesn't say anything for a moment or so, and then,

when he does speak, he is so densely intense, so heavily sincere, so downright patronizing I'm immediately sorry I called.

"Oh, my God!" he moans. "Why? Why, *God*? Tell me, *GOD*, why would she do such a thing?"

Not clear as to whether it's from me or God that Hank expects an answer, I remain silent. No answer from God, he turns to me. "*Steve*, tell me where she is!"

I give him the address of the hospital, and moaning again in sorrow, he tells me he'll be there as soon as he finishes this hand.

An hour later Hank shows up.

I lead him to Chris' room, and the two of us look in to see all those tubes going every which way. Hank has trouble watching, though. He says it's all too upsetting for him. So we leave the room, and I walk him to the elevator, all the while listening to him asking God why she did it.

"Why? Why would she do such a thing to me? Huh? Why *ME*?"

"Hank, she's the one in the hospital; you're just visiting."

"But why me? *WHY ME*?"

I push the elevator button. He clenches his teeth and says, "If that cunt thinks she's going to get me back with this stunt, she's crazy." I blink twice, assuring myself he has indeed said what I think he's said, and then haul off and slug him, barely clipping the bottom of his chin.

Which is a *big* mistake.

You don't go around casually almost belting an ex-college quarterback still built like the proverbial brick wall. Not if you value the appearance of your face anyway.

I'm so proud I was even able to muster that first offensive I remain practically nonchalant as he grabs my lapels and, connecting, smashes me in the face, which I have to tell you hurts an awful lot, and sends me flying backward, crashing to the floor.

The elevator doors open. He steps in and is soon gone. I'm removed to the comforts of the emergency room, where I'm treated for a swollen black eye and a deflated ego before being sent home.

Returning to my apartment, I find my two bulldogs napping in front of what used to be my door, now shredded to pieces and scattered about the hallway like so many toothpicks. I tack up a blanket in the empty doorway, hoping any would-be burglar passing through will at least have the decency to ignore such an easy mark.

Awakening the next morning, blinking the one eye that is capable of opening, I look down at the bulldog licking my chin. The fellow in the bathroom mirror staring at me is a total stranger, so I dispense with my usual morning greeting.

Arriving at the hospital an hour or so later, I bring with me one long-stemmed rose. If she'd just given birth to twins, I'd have bought a dozen. Suicides, somehow, are not the same celebration.

A nurse leads me down the corridor to the ward in which Chris has been transferred, telling me I can only stay a very few minutes as the patient is most groggy.

Groggy? She's practically catatonic.

Sound asleep, the only movements she makes are twistings of her head, accompanied by moans and sobs coming up from somewhere deep within her.

I look around the ward, and may I tell you what a hit that is? Remember *Snake Pit* with Olivia De Havilland? Well, that's this. Sickies, weirdos, fanatics, kids freaking out on drugs, all mingled together with your other run-of-the-mill, average suicidals like Chris.

And if you weren't depressed *before* moving into this ward, I mean if you were in the hospital for a hemorrhoidectomy or something and just happened to be placed in here, you'd probably prefer choking yourself to death with your toothbrush rather than spend another day surrounded by these dregs of humanity.

Chris is not at all responsive to me, so I place the rose on the night table next to her bed and leave.

Returning the following day, in the afternoon, I find Chris sitting up in bed, picking at her lunch. Walking over, I smile and give her a kiss. She sort of blushes, I guess because she really doesn't know what else to do.



"What happened to your eye?" she asks quietly, at last.

"I got mugged."

"How awful! What happened?"

"I'll tell you later. I'd rather hear what's new with you."

"Nothing," she says demurely.

"Nothing!" I raise my voice. "Chris, you tried to kill yourself. What do you mean 'nothing' is new?"

"Don't shout. The entire Sioux nation is in my temples, beating their tomtoms."

"I'm not surprised. Are you satisfied?"

"Sure. It was worth it."

"Oh, come on."

"No, honest. The cutest young intern pumped my stomach and asked me out for Saturday night. I think I'm in love."

"What about Hank?"

"Hank *who*?"

"Hank, the fellow you did this to impress."

"Please, Steve. Get this straight. I did this to impress no one. I did this to end everything because my life is constantly returning to Empty. It's lonely. I get up in the morning and put on the television for company. So I stopped fighting. Hank was hardly the whole cause. Simply the final catalyst in a long chain of disappointments."

"I had no idea. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I had no idea myself."

"But why would you want to die?"

Chris shrugs.

"All right then. Why wouldn't you want to live?"

"I don't know. I just wasn't finding either alternative particularly attractive. It's all a treadmill, isn't it?"

An elderly, graying woman in the back of the ward sits up in bed and suddenly bellows, "DON'T THINK ANY OF YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH THIS! OH NO! NOT THIS TIME! THIS TIME YOU'VE GONE TOO FAR!" which draws most of the attention in the room to her.

"YOU'RE ALL STARING AT ME!" she screams, which is true, giving her something of a case of justified paranoia.

"FUCK OFF, OLD BITCH!" yells one of the other

weirdos, back at her, displaying a certain lack of sensitivity to her situation.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?" screams the elderly woman, pulling at her thick eyebrows.

"I SAID FUCK-OFF-OLD-BITCH!" he repeats, this time enunciating each syllable for greater clarification.

"I'M AN OLD LADY. HAVEN'T YOU GOT NO RESPECT? WHAT DO YOU MEAN 'FUCK ME'? FUCK YOU!"

Things seem to be getting a little heated around the ward this lunch hour. Chris has finished not eating her lunch and is ready to go back to sleep for another eighteen hours, so I kiss her good-bye and leave, glad to get out of Happydale alive, before the Marat-Sade insurrection.

Returning to my apartment house, I find myself getting the chilliest looks from the three neighbors waiting at the elevator. And although I don't necessarily think they're ALL STARING AT ME, I'm definitely getting vibrations like "So that's the brute who made that beautiful girl do that to herself!"

Now I know how Jack Lemmon felt in *The Apartment* when Shirley MacLaine tried to end it all in his place. And I only want to yell back at all their sideward glances, "It's not my doing. It's Fred MacMurray's fault!"

Chris rests in the hospital another day and a half before being discharged. She goes from there directly to her new place on West Eighty-fifth Street, which is now ready for occupancy.

On Saturday night she does indeed go out with the cute intern who pumped her stomach, but it doesn't amount to much as he's twelve or something and interested in studying her mainly for the paper he's writing on suicide.

Chris and I get together for dinner the following evening, and she shows me the list of four psychiatrists given her before she left the hospital. She was advised to contact one of them immediately to help her out of her depression. Apparently a big problem among suicidals is a high propensity to have another go at death in the period immediately following an unsuccessful attempt.



We talk about it and agree Chris would be best served by seeking out the counsel of one of these shrinks, at least until she pulls herself up a bit.

So Chris goes to therapy, and I go to the first day of rehearsal for the Broadway play in which I have a total of twelve lines.

With a black eye.

Which doesn't sit well with the director, Abe Burrows, when I tell him I walked into a brick wall. He's leery of accident-prone people and announces this to the assembled cast, pointing to my puffed eye as example. But he's not really one to talk. Two weeks later, on the stage of the Martin Beck Theater, as we are about to begin our first run-through of the first act, he gives some advice to Nanette Fabray and Stockard Channing, two of the stars of the comedy, turns to walk back into the theater so he can watch us and, on his way, falls down into the orchestra pit, a distance of some fourteen feet, where he dislocates his shoulder, cracks a couple of ribs and bruises his heart.

He is taken to the hospital, and the play is taken to the cleaner's.

We rehearse without a director for several weeks, no mean feat, until Burrows' bruises heal some, and then go to Boston for three weeks where we try out. And try out. And try out. And the authors rewrite and rewrite, and the play keeps getting worse and worse. And everyone connected with the production knows it, but no one is telling anyone else how bad he thinks it all is. Least of all the authors, who've watched their once very amusing play slide away from brightness and promise into the claptrap of contrivance and foolishness.

The play, for the scores of rewrites, isn't working. The producers are having trouble raising the rest of the capitalization, combing the backwoods for backers. There is no advance sale in New York. And the leading man is having trouble remembering his lines. But like kamikazes, we fly to New York, crash into the Martin Beck Theater on Forty-fifth Street, in the heart of the Broadway theatrical

district, where we open on April 8th, to less-than-enthusiastic notices, and close the same night.

So much for my Broadway debut.

And so much for Chris' attempt at suicide. Both of which have more in common than we know.

But please, don't misunderstand.

Chris isn't always depressed. And when she isn't —BINGO!—she's often manic. And Chris up-and-at-'em can be a good deal more confusing than Chris down for the count.

The first day we met is a perfect example.

It was a Wednesday, five years ago. We were, as memory would have it, happier in those days and hardly ever hit bottom. I know for sure it was a Wednesday because Broadway wasn't yet a terminal patient and I would buy a standing room ticket for a Broadway matinee *every* Wednesday.

This particular afternoon I purchased a spot at the back of the Lunt-Fontanne Theater to see *How Now, Dow Jones*, a minor musical which went on to become a major failure.

I was halfheartedly thumbing through the playbill, impatiently waiting for the Hadassah theater party ladies to quiet down and the show to begin.

And that's when Chris came hurrying toward me, a beautiful explosion of color and energy.

"Excuse me, are you four?" she asked, slightly out of breath.

"For what?"

"Four. Number four."

I looked down at my standing room spot. "Oh! Number four. Yes, that's me."

"Good. Here!" she said, handing me a small notebook. "You left this at the box-office window. I bought standing room ticket five, and the man there said that number four had left this, and since I would be standing next to you, would I mind returning it, so of course I told him I'd be more than happy to and so here's your notebook number four and so forth and so forth."

"And so *on* and so forth," I corrected her.

"That's what I said," she insisted. "I'm *so* excited. Can you tell?"

"You seem excited, yes."

"Excited? I may have a nervous breakdown. Would you believe . . . this is my *first* Broadway show! My very first! I've only waited my entire *life* for this moment. I'm an actress as you may well have already guessed and we got to New York only two days ago and I still can't believe I'm finally here. I hope you don't mind, but I just couldn't control myself from peeking into your notebook. Some of your comments about the plays you've seen are so interesting, I didn't understand a word of it."

"Well, I just write down impressions about what I've seen and then read them back later. Often I don't understand any of it, either."

"How cosmopolitan!" Chris bubbled.

"Is it?"

"I don't know." She deflated. "What's cosmopolitan?"

"That depends. Caviar for breakfast is probably cosmopolitan."

"Don't you simply adore New York? I've always planned to come here to work in the theater. All my life."

"Well, you made it."

"We had to wait until Arthur got his teaching permit."

"Arthur?"

"My husband. *Yuccch!* Let's not talk about him. I think I want a divorce. I'm Chris. Chris Canaday. Who are you?"

"Steve. Steve Butler."

"*How-do-you-do?*" said Chris, enunciating each word, pumping my hand for emphasis before exclaiming excitedly, "OH, MY GOD, THE HOUSELIGHTS ARE DIMMING!"

"Yes," I offered back, being somewhat at a loss for words.

"I'M SO EXCITED! MY HEART IS BEATING SO FAST I'D ASK YOU TO FEEL, BUT YOU'D PROBABLY THINK I WAS MAKING A PASS OR SOMETHING!"

"Sssssssh!" came a harsh note from one of the old ladies seated in front of us.

"I'm terribly sorry." Chris leaned over and whispered to the shusher. "You see, this is my *first* Broadway show, and I guess I'm a little excited. You won't hear another peep from me until intermission! Musicals are my favorite thing in the whole world. I'd rather do a musical than eat!"

The old lady didn't answer Chris, as I recall, but just looked at her in disbelief.

The houselights did go out at that point as the conductor rose above the orchestra, acknowledging the accompanying smattering of applause. He raised his baton . . . paused several beats . . . and then charged into the overture.

Chris, standing next to me, grabbed my hand and squeezed it so tight I thought sure the circulation would clot. Her face lit up and she smiled and beamed and glowed and sighed and winked at me and I winked back because I had been where she was many years before and *I knew*.

She was experiencing that one-shot loss of innocence as the overture in the Lunt-Fontanne Temple began, and that costly bolt of magic electrified her entire body, relinquishing her theatrical virginity to Broadway, the high priestess of us all.

And watching Chris that matinee day as the overture mounted to a rousing finish, I knew she was hooked by the religious experience, just like the rest of us orthodox neurotic dramatis personae.

After the show, I took her to the bar at Sardi's, a corny thing to do even then. It thrilled her.

"What a terrific day!" she said, beaming, after we toasted her success. "I don't want it to ever end."

"But what about your husband?"

"Please. It's all too messy. I should've listened to my mother. I was so sure it would work out. What a letdown! Have you ever opened your eyes one morning and realized your husband is a total stranger?"

"Never."

"Well, believe me, it breaks a lot of balloons. You know, I get very serious about my relationships. I think love should always be permanent. I mean at least temporarily!"

"I see."

"But that's me: always getting into situations for the wrong reasons. Then, by the time I realize it's not going to work, POW! it's too late. I've already committed myself."

"Like with what's-his-name?"

"Yes. Like with Arthur. You're very perceptive."

"Perhaps, but you're also somewhat transparent."

"I am, aren't I? Well, I promise you, right now, Mr. Steve Butler, if there's one thing I plan to develop in New York besides great fame and success, it's sophistication and cosmopolitanism."

God knows, she was off to a shaky start.

Well! So much for my *first* day with Chris.

Now.

Five years, four drama coaches, three rather serious affairs with married men, two psychiatrists, one divorce and one attempt at suicide later, our story begins.

It starts on a Sunday.





# ACT ONE



## *Chapter One*

I am comfortably sleeping with the bulldogs: Ruth, snoring on top of the blankets, squashed in between my calves, and Harry, his head resting comfortably on the pillow next to mine, farting like gangbusters.

The doorbell rings, and opening my eyes, I look at my digital clock.

Blinking twice to make sure the figures tally, I see, sure enough, it's six forty-five in the morning. I've had auditions almost every day this week, some starting as early as nine, and was really looking forward to sleeping late.

The bell rings again. Indignantly, Ruth stretches and moves to the bottom of the bed. Harry, the watchdog of the family, sighs an exasperated chortle and goes back to sleep. There's no defending the castle at this hour.

A third bell, and I am standing by my bed, naked, freezing and, throwing on my blue terry robe, wondering why I never trained the dogs to answer the bell.

Opening the door, I find it is of course Chris, standing there looking ravishing, hidden behind three huge packages branded with ZABAR'S across their fronts in red ink.

"I couldn't sleep, so I came here."

"So I gathered."

"I'm just so excited about that soap opera I haven't been able to shut my eyes for two days. Do you think I'll get it? I was *so* right, I've got to get it. The tarot cards were very vague."

"I thought you threw out your tarot cards."

"I did. I gave up reading. For two days. Then I had to find out *something* about my audition, so I bought a new deck. Oh, you came up in my reading this morning."

"What'd it say?"

"That we'd be getting together soon."

"And here you are!"

"You see. The prophecy came true."

"It's a miracle."

"If I don't get that part, I'll kill myself! Don't worry. I'm only kidding. Look. I brought brunch!"

"Terrific. Wake me when it's ready," I say with a yawn, stumbling into the bedroom. Disrobing, I crawl back into bed, careful not to wake her majesty, Ruth, who has moved into the warmed spot I claimed as my own not three minutes before. The body isn't even cold yet.

I try pushing Ruth over a bit so as to make way for myself. But Ruth doesn't go in for being shoved about. You don't bully a bulldog. So we compromise, and our *détente* consists of *sharing* that part of the bed we each now claim as our own turf.

No sooner do I pull the covers over my wearies than there's Chris, hurrying in behind me, complaining about the itchiness of her clothing, and, in so saying, she removes her skirt and sweater before recovering herself with my blue terry robe.

Now comfortable, she draws back my covers and crawls into bed.

My digital clock says it's six fifty-two, and here in my somewhat-less-than-queen-sized bed with me are one crazy lady in a blue robe, two bulldogs of questionable repute and three Zabar's shopping bags.

I hint it might be a good idea to put the shopping bags in the kitchen.

"Don't be ridiculous!" protests Chris. "We have to eat out of them."

And of course she is right. Turning around and sitting up, I find Chris unloading her groceries ON MY BED and then, right there, preparing from many unwrapped waxed, boxed and Saran-wrapped bundles, a lobster salad-onion

roll combo replete with tomato slice, onion sliver, Swiss cheese wedge and black olive. She has even brought plastic utensils with which to cut, slice and pierce. After handing me her mammoth creation, she goes to work on one for herself.

Chris picks up a new dollop of lobster-laced cream cheese, which she slaps onto her roll with gusto. Tickling her side, I ask, "How come no coffee?"

"Oh, of course!" And saying so, she opens the contents of another of her Pandora's bags, dips her head in and pulls out a steaming container.

"Cream and sugar?" she daintily inquires, handing it to me.

"Incredible. I don't get this service on TWA."

"That's what friends are for. Care for anything else?"

"Your body."

"Naughty, naughty," Chris scolds lightly. "Let's not get primitive."

"I wasn't getting primitive. I was getting seductive."

"Well, I should hope so. My ego would be demolished if I thought you didn't want to seduce me anymore."

"But I can't get near you."

"Well, don't stop trying. Who knows? Maybe someday, in a mad moment of passion, I'll toss reason to the wind and we'll get it on."

"You think?"

"Sure, I think. God, sometimes I want you so bad, I could do it on the spot. But I hold back."

"Why?"

"Because! Don't be so impatient. If it's meant to be, it'll happen. The cards have never linked us romantically, you know."

"I'm depressed."

"Don't be depressed, Steve. I'm depressed enough for both of us. Look! You're my best friend! Who pulls me out of all my downs and all my depressions and anxieties and insecurities and nasties?"

"Your psychiatrist."

"Don't be ridiculous. My shrink merely tells me *why* I'm

upset, and that usually makes me *more* unhappy, and that's why I stop seeing him so often. You, Steve. You're the one who pulls me up from the depths whenever I get the yuckies. And I love you for it. In many ways more than any of the idiots I get myself mixed up with. Besides, you carefully avoid permanent relationships while I run all over them. What would we do together? Understand? You're always there when I need you, and that's more important than all the best screwing in the world. I won't risk losing that, and when friends start to ball, their relationship changes, and I know I'd just freak if I couldn't depend upon what we have together. Okay?"

"Fuck you."

Chris bats her eyelashes innocently and gives me her Southern belle. "I declare, sailor, you do have a way with the words."

"I really do adore you."

"Complaints, complaints!" And Chris is gone again, hidden in the third of her Zabar's bags. She reappears moments later with dessert: marzipan cookies, my downfall!

Trouble is, marzipan is also Harry and Ruth's weak spot. One sniff of the almond-scented pastry, and both my docile dogs *lunge* at Chris like starving peasants on a Siberian bread line. Their attack sends her flying backward, making her lose control of her container. The coffee erupts into the air like the bomb at Hiroshima before it comes splashing down, splattering its brown glue all over the sheets.

Ruth, slightly scalded, leaps from the bed with a yip, leaving for posterity a paw print in the crowded cream cheese and also knocking over a cucumber salad we haven't even yet tasted.

Five minutes later Chris, still in my blue terry, and I, now in blue boxers, sit in the living room while the bulldogs stay in the evacuated bedroom, devouring the remains of our aborted six-in-the-morning brunch. My hunch is that right now we're probably the only people in America serving their dogs breakfast in bed.



"I'm starving," grumbles Chris.

"Join the dogs."

"No thanks."

"Chris, I got a call from Maggie and Douglas. They want to know, finally, whether or not you're coming with me to Vermont next week for Thanksgiving."

"I'd like to go, sure," says Chris. "But how would we get there?"

"We'll borrow someone's car."

"Oh, come on. Who do we know dumb enough to loan us their car?"

We reflect upon that awhile, thinking of likely candidates, and having a difficult time of it, until about seven fifteen, when Chris is taken, rather suddenly, with a powerful wave of weariness and now must get to sleep.

"This is it," she tells me. "I've been up for three nights, and my cycle is returning to Rest, thank God. So I gotta get out of here. I may sleep for days! Call if you think of a way to get to Vermont. We should leave early. It's a long drive, so it's important we get a good, healthy start. I'll pack a lunch basket. . . . Oh, I'm *so* exhausted!"

Chris dresses in forty-five seconds flat and is soon at the door, saying good-bye.

"Now don't thank me for the brunch."

"I hadn't planned to."

"It was my pleasure."

And like a tornado whose maximum impact has passed before one has time to take it all in and assess, Chris is out the door and gone.

Since my bed could be condemned by the board of health, I cannot return there. I am also no longer tired, so I crawl up on the couch with the *Sunday Times* and try to plod my way through a very unfriendly crossword, in *ink*, of course, since you *never* can find a pencil when you want one.

I am up.

I am awake.

So I can't go back to bed.

But Chris is on her way home.

To sleep of course, for hours and hours.  
Leaving me to face the rest of the long day alone.  
By myself.  
No one else.  
Unless you count the dogs.  
Who are inside, eating my sheets.

## Chapter Two

Monday morning around eleven the phone rings. It is Chris.

"I'm *so* depressed!" is her greeting.

"What about?"

"My agent just called, waking me in the middle of the day, telling me I didn't get the soap."

"I'm sorry."

"Hate being disturbed with bad news."

"I know."

"She said the producers thought I was a most interesting type, though. What do you suppose that means?"

"Probably that they thought you were a most interesting type."

"No subtext there, huh?"

"Probably not. What are you going to do now?"

"What do you think? I'm going to get up, take half a dozen Valium for breakfast and then go back to sleep."

"I see."

"This is not a day worth facing the world."

"All right."

"Will you call tomorrow and wake me?"

"Sure."

"Oh, by the by, I called my friend Roger who said he'll gladly loan us; he won't be using it this weekend."

"How come?"

"I don't know. Seems he's strung out over the latest stock-market plunge or something. He asks only that we

drive him to work. He's planning to spend the entire holiday locked in his office, doing paperwork and brooding."

"Makes sense."

"All right. Talk to you tomorrow. And remember, we'll be leaving bright and early Wednesday morning no later than ten for a good, healthy start."

"You bet."

"Good night."

"Good morning."

The rest of my morning is spent being rejected at a couple of auditions for commercials and keeping an appointment with a casting director.

The first audition is a voice-over for Alpo dog food in which I try out for the part of a misunderstood cocker spaniel.

The second finds me as a concerned young husband-father coming in from the rain with my dripping kids, insisting that if we don't all gargle Listerine immediately, we'll be stricken with cholera or something before dinner.

Early in the afternoon I see a top casting director at Grey Advertising who tells me I have fabulous teeth and then sends *me* down the hall to show *them* to her assistant so they can remember to bring in my choppers next time there's a toothpaste call.

Later in the afternoon, Pat Meltzer, my peptic-ulcered, acerbic ace theatrical agent at the William Morris office, calls.

"Hello?"

"Stay there, Steve! It's Pat. I'll be right back!" And before I know it, I'm on Hold for at least three minutes. Eventually she comes back on the line, firing away in her least relaxed rat-a-tat delivery.

"Okay, Steve. Now . . . where were we?"

"So far, I've said hello."

"Okay. Here it is. Great deal cooking. Sounds right up your alley. They want someone tall, attractive, terrific. I told them you had black hair and two of the warmest blue eyes in show business and talent, too, and they said send you

over. . . . I can't be expected to do everything myself, Joan, call the Coast yourself and tell them if the scripts aren't here in three days I'm threatening to blow up the CBS building! I'm sorry, Steve, where were we?"

"They said send me over."

"Right. Anyway it's for a comedy called *March into April*. They're taking it to Broadway, of all places. Larry Hagan's producing and I want you to go down to his office on Fifty-fifth Street this afternoon and pick up sides for Alfred, got it? It's a principal role, so don't fuck it up. The audition's tomorrow, and don't tell me there's no answer, dummy, they must still be out to lunch. Really, Joan, just leave word with the message desk and bother me only with major catastrophes, okay? I'm sorry, Steve. Where were we?"

"*March into April*. I think I've got it all."

"Good. Okay . . . I can't believe anyone would really want to make agenting their life's work. Oh, well. Talk to you later. JOAN! DROP EVERYTHING AND GET ME DAVID MERRICK'S OFFICE!"

Click.

And so, acting under orders, I bicycle downtown and pick up sides for Alfred, the twenty-five-year-old son of a freewheeling, swinging, hip couple who rebels by going straight.

Amusing idea.

Returning home, I study the three-page scene for a couple of hours, trying to work out something of a characterization from the information which comes across in the sides.

And there I sit the following morning, Tuesday, backstage at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, waiting to try out for *March into April*, finding myself alternately composed, confident and cowering. This crowded audition is running typically behind schedule, so I must impatiently hang around for over an hour, making small talk and sharing anxiety attacks with fifty other unemployed neurotic actors.

Finally, a very tall stage manager approaches, pointing a

long, accusing finger at me, which I take as a signal meaning the lions are again famished and I'm the next Christian to be thrust into the arena.

I walk to the edge of the wings and watch the end of the tryout being rendered by the fellow onstage. He finishes and tells the producers something of his acting background. They thank him; he smiles, thanks them back profusely and calmly exits.

As he walks past me into the wings, however, his smile sours, and he flings his script to the floor, cursing savagely.

"He seems upset," I say to the stage manager, who looks at me disdainfully, saying, "Follow me!"

So I follow him.

Onstage there is one very large, very bright, very naked light bulb which makes everyone look like the Phantom of the Opera. Union costs are so high and rules so strict that if you so much as turn on a spot or footlight, it'll cost dearly. Union generosity, however, permits the presence of this one migraine-inducing bulb.

"This is Steve Butler!" announces the stage manager to the darkened house.

"Hello, Steve," comes a voice or two from the blackness of the theater.

"Hello," I answer back to the inky darkness. Auditioning like this is like working before a two-way mirror. They can see you, but you can't see them.

I hear some fidgeting going on in the orchestra: some discussion, some moving about. So I wait for things to settle down. But things don't settle down, and soon some new voice from the mysterious outer depths calls out, "Whenever you're ready!"

So I begin reading the scene. A big confrontation moment between me (Alfred) and my mother, whom I've just learned is readying to convert to Buddhism. And reading the part of my mother, with typical managerial unenthusiasm, is the six-foot-three stage manager.

I'm up there doing my best, fighting for my life. And may I tell you how annoying and distracting it is to be plagued by whispering, bustling and general inattentiveness from



whoever is sitting out there in that exalted darkened unknown?

My mother the stage manager delivers his/her last line, which is the cue for my final furious speech, and as I address myself to him/her, he curiously turns and leaves to summon the next actor for the reading following mine.

So there I am. Alone onstage. Spewing lines and going into my prepared rage, addressing my anger, though, at no one in particular, since no one is listening.

I finish the speech, and for the first time since I walked onstage, the house is quiet. There is a short silence while I stand there, blankly staring at the back of the darkened theater, contemplating alternative careers, until someone finally breaks the mood with more whispering.

That goes on for a while until still another voice from somewhere out there asks, "Tell me about yourself, Steve. What have you done?"

I walk toward the front of the stage, hoping by some miracle of eye control to be able to make out in the dark some idea of to whom it is I'm speaking. But since I cannot, I address my résumé to the entire house, telling my life's work to a lot of empty seats.

Then the whispering picks up again until at last someone says, "Okay, Steve. Thank you!" I nod my head, for whatever it's worth, and walk off into the wings, the whispering still going on out there, now behind my back.

At least now I understand why the actor before me blew his stack.

That evening I speak with Chris, complaining about the rude treatment I received at my audition this morning. Chris hasn't capacity for too much sympathy, though, as she just spent the day dealing with no less than four hostile casting directors on four very crowded commercial calls.

"I'm glad we're getting away tomorrow," I tell her.

"Me, too," agrees Chris, adding, "A few days' rest before facing this rat race again. I've already got three commercial calls next week and an Off-Broadway musical revue to sing for."

"Good for you."

"Okay. Roger and I'll pick you up tomorrow at ten sharp. And for God's sake, Steve, be on time!"

The following day, Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, at exactly ten o'clock, I stumble down to the lobby, replete with luggage, ski equipment and the two panting, asthmatic bulldogs.

And there I wait. And wait and wait and after waiting forty-five minutes, Chris and Roger pull up in this very unusual-looking foreign car that has no two pieces of equipment matching. It looks like a Mazda, has a VW engine, a spotted paint job and no doubt a thirty-day guarantee which must have expired seven years ago. Very strange, but knowing how Roger likes to tinker around with cars, taking them apart and reassembling them, understandable.

I throw the dogs in the back and climb in, squashing myself next to Roger. The car puttters off.

"Hi, Roger."

"How are you, Steve?" asks Roger, nose to nose, in his generally subdued, upper-crust manner.

"Fine, fine."

"Sorry we're a little late, Steve," Chris chimes in.

"A *little*?" I question back.

"The reason we're late, Steve, is I had to instruct Chris on how to jiggle the key when she puts it in the ignition." Roger's a very serious fellow.

"Jiggle the key?" I ask, managing to keep a straight face.

"Right. Like this." Roger demonstrates rather earnestly the correct way to jiggle the ignition key. "Now that she knows how to jiggle it, the rest of your journey is in safe check."

We drop Roger off at work and are at last off to the country.

Except when, a few minutes later, we drive onto the West Side Highway.

"Chris?"

"Yes?"

"You're going south."

"No good?"

"No good, Chris. Vermont is north."

"Oh," says Chris thoughtfully, as though she'd just picked up a valuable lesson in geography. "What should I do?"

"Guess."

"Uhm, let's see. Get off at the next exit?"

"Not a bad start."

"And then turn around and go the right way?"

"Couldn't've figured that one out better myself."

A few minutes later we are heading *north* on the West Side Highway. All systems are go!

Until we approach the next exit.

"Oh, look!" says Chris gingerly. "That sign says FDR DRIVE KEEP RIGHT! We don't want that!" And, saying so, she proceeds to KEEP LEFT, which brings us down a ramp and off the West Side Highway at the Twenty-third Street exit.

"I think that was a mistake, getting off there. Huh?"

"Chris, I'm trying to remain patient and calm."

"One would never know it to look at the color of your face."

I take over the driving at this point, at least till we get out of the city. Then, I promise, I'll turn the driving back over to Mad Wheels.

Driving onto the West Side Highway (our third entrance), I then go up the Taconic State Parkway until—

"Chris," I say calmly, watching Roger's speedometer needle descend to zero as the car grinds to a halt. "You'll never believe this. . . ."

"Steve, why are we stopping?"

"That's what you'll never believe."

"What?"

"I think we're out of gas."

"No."

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

"It's not impossible. Do you see that we are no longer moving?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's because we have run out of gas."

"Oops!" gulps Chris, suddenly remembering in a seizure of total recall how Roger had warned that our Mazda-cum-jalopy has the gas tank of a Honda, the thirst of a Cadillac, a broken gas gauge and had implored her to fill the tank before leaving the city.

So.

While parked on the side of the road for over three hours, Chris and I fight over who is to assume command of the wheel when we get started again. Eventually, a dilapidated tow truck pulls up, and its dilapidated driver inquires whether or not we are in need of assistance.

In need of assistance?

The fellow whips out a huge five-gallon vat of gasoline, which he unloads into our thirsty tank before charging us twenty-five dollars.

But it's not as if we can take our business elsewhere.

No.

This is clearly a seller's market.

And so, twenty-five dollars poorer and hardly wiser for the experience, Chris and I continue our voyage north. I am at the wheel. My twenty-five fat ones bailed us out, giving me all driving rights for the duration of the ride.

Speeding down the highway several hours later, through the soft Massachusetts twilight, I tell Chris I've worked up a terrific appetite. So she pulls out her Zabar's equipment and plies me with salads and sandwiches, cheeses and fruits, cookies and yogurts and a bottle of wine *and* a carton of milk *and* half a dozen dog biscuits for the kids in the back.

And when she pulls out a joint for an after-dinner smoke, I begin to have my first serious doubts that we ever really will see the Vermont border before December.

Soon it starts to rain. Raining hard, as a matter of fact. It's pretty chilly out there, too, hinting of a change to snow.

Chris and I share the joint, and since I often forget she always carries the best dope, I am now *very* stoned . . . at seventy-five miles an hour! I tell Chris I'd rather not have to play the Highway Death Toll Telethon Game, so would she mind driving for a while?

Am I kidding myself?

Mad Wheels not want to drive?

I pull over, and Chris happily leaps out of her side of the car, races around in the rain to my side, as I slide over to her seat and she plops down, very wet, on mine.

And we are off again, on our way to nowhere in particular.

We pass the next several hours singing scores to musicals we love, taking the parts we've always wanted to play. I do Billy Bigelow to her Julie Jordan, my J. Pierpont Finch to her Rosemary, my Tony to her Maria. And so we move on, two stoned, drunken travelers, fighting their way north, singing at the top of their lungs.

The dogs, of course, sleeping through the entire concert!

And it is not until we are somewhere deep in the middle of the lone, cold state of Vermont, during our "People Will Say We're in Love" duet from *Oklahoma!*, my Curly to her Laurey, as Chris peaks with a very impressive, if slightly off-key, high C, and as the heavy raindrops pelting the window beat out a cacophonous rhythm to our madness and the windshield wipers lend their support, serving as twin batons governing our pace, while all the world's a stage, especially right now at this moment for the two of us and I get one of my frequent love rushes for Chris and want more than anything to grab and smother her with kisses, wet and sloppy, all over her neck, getting lost in a sweep of ribald passion, that the car grinds to a slow halt because, believe it or not, we have run out of gas.

Again.



## Chapter Three

Sitting on the side of the road in the rain, biting my cuticles to shreds, I very slowly turn and ask Chris, in as casual a tone as I can muster, if she thinks it is not a bit extraordinary that we have actually run out of gasoline not once, but twice in the same day.

Chris shrugs coquettishly, which, while neither explanation nor apology, beats no response at all.

So.

Out of gas again, somewhere in the sinister, dank night of Vermont in the pouring rain at nine thirty in the evening, we sit, staring at each other. It is so pitch dark out there you can't tell where the mountains end and the skies begin. No sense my getting out and walking. We're not near *anything!*

Hostages of the state, we sit in the car and wait, speculating all the while how many hours, days or months we'll be able to survive on our leftovers from Zabar's.

"If things get really desperate, we can always eat the dogs," offers Chris calmly.

"That's a comfort."

Now that the engine's been silenced, the heater is no longer blowing. And it doesn't take very long for the outside chill to penetrate. So we zipper up and button down what we've got on. Even the dogs are shivering in their sleep. Soon I can see vapors of my breath when I speak.

"I'm scared!" announces Chris.

"Don't be ridiculous!"



"Who knows what's lurking out there, stalking the cold night, waiting for the right moment to attack? Thieves, muggers, rapists. . . ."

"Traveling insurance salesmen. . . ."

"Anything. I'm frightened."

"That's silly, Chris. The country's much safer than the city."

"True?"

"True."

"Oh." Long pause. Then, with a heavy sigh: "What a relief!"

Now *I* take a long pause. "Your capacity for vacillation never fails to dazzle me."

"Me too. I went to a medium last week who said if I don't stop acting so strongly on momentary impulses, I'm going to ruin my life. And that was the good news."

"What do you suppose triggers it all?"

"I don't know, I guess I live for the moment."

"Why not, kid? Life is a cabaret."

"Ain't it the truth?"

"We better get out of here soon. If Ruth doesn't get her anticonvulsant medication, she'll have one of her bulldog fits on us."

"That'd be good for a tickle. Where are her pills?"

"In the trunk."

"Maybe you should get them, Steve. It'll give us a project. I read where a group of marooned sailors who kept busy did better than another group of marooned sailors who just sat around masturbating."

Agreed. .

So, for occupational therapy, I trek to the trunk, shivering in the wet cold, and retrieve from my suitcase Ruth's bottle of Dilantins, ultimately administering, wrapped between two layers of bologna for enticement, her dosage of two.

Looking over at Chris, I see she has lapsed, while I was out shopping for the bologna, into one of her paralyses of intensity. Approaching her with caution, I ask, "What's on your mind?"

"Should I go back to my analyst?" Chris asks, blankly staring out the window.

"I don't know. Do you want to?"

"I'm not sure. You know how easily I change my mind. It's such a commitment. And I can't afford it. They stopped running my Arpège commercial, so I can't live on that anymore. And he gets me so depressed sometimes. But then there are moments when he's very bright and kind of cute and neither of us can figure out if I have a sexual fantasy attachment to him or if he's a father figure to me or if I just feel hostility toward him because he is basically, down under all that intellectual veneer, just a creep. I don't think he really understands me anyway, so I may as well not go back to him."

"Well, there you are. You decided that all by yourself. I'm proud of you. Now stick to that."

"I will. But you know he really is the only one who understands my depressions."

"Then maybe you should go back to him."

"But I hate him."

"Then don't go back to him."

"But then again, last month, when I was down, he brought me right out of it."

"Then go back to him."

"But I'm not down now."

"Then don't go back to him."

"You're right. I won't!"

"Good."

"Maybe I'll just go back once. Get a feeler."

"All right. Do that."

"Naw. Fuck him. I won't go back." She shrugs. "All he probably wants is my body anyway."

Two more hours pass while Chris and I alternately change her mind, doze, chat and nibble. Ruth's snoring soon reaches sonic boom proportions, and Harry retaliates by releasing one of his gas attacks on us.

"If Harry doesn't stop teeing off, we'll all soon be asphyxiated," observes Chris.

"Why don't we open a window?" I offer.

"Are you crazy? It's too cold. Freezing could be detrimental to our health."

"Would you rather be nauseous?"

"I'd rather be neither, Steve. Why don't we just throw the farting dog out of the car?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I tell her. "The weather's changing."

"What?"

"Look outside."

Chris looks. "It isn't!"

"It is!"

"It isn't!"

"Put on the lights."

Chris puts on the headlights, and it is.

Snowing.

So we remain in our smelly, sealed-tight, frozen fart-mobile, snow slowly mounting around us, very cold, very wet, again very hungry and now very tired. Chris crawls over to me and puts her head in my lap, and we both try counting sheep.

Some three hours later, at around four in the morning, we are awakened by the bright lights of an emergency patrol truck pulling up behind us. A young, personable Canadian gets out, and we tell him our troubles.

He fills our empty tank fast enough and then charges us twenty-five dollars, which must be the going rate around New England these days for five gallons of hand-delivered gasoline.

But I have no cash left on me and damned anyway if I'm going to spring for another of Chris' mishaps. So she begrudgingly writes out a check, ultimately even adding a two-dollar tip because she thinks the guy's got sexy eyes.

I announce that I'm going to drive, and Chris grows mutinous, claiming *she* paid for the gas, thus giving her the same driving rights and permissions allotted me when I last coughed up the cash.

"All right, Chris, you drive. At this point I don't care if we ever get there."

And from the looks of things, perhaps we won't. It's still

snowing heavily, has been for three hours, and there are as many accumulated inches. But neither sleet nor snow nor dark of night can deter Mad Wheels from her appointed rounds and we are soon snowplowing toward Stowe.

A ride that would normally, under ideal conditions, take a little over half an hour between Montpelier and Stowe takes, this early morning, almost two. We turn off the main highway at Waterbury, heading for Stowe just as the first hint of early light appears. It still snows heavily, turning the countryside lovely in all-white. And driving isn't too bad as the road here has been recently plowed.

Steady at the wheel, Chris mentions how peaceful, lovely, serene and inviting is Vermont . . . and how happy she is to be here, away from all the hassles of the city.

And as we pull off the highway and up the long, snow-laden winding drive leading to the Lewises' house, on this cold, gray, clouded morning, I see that my watch reads seven fifteen.

Pointing out the hour to Chris, I ask, "What do you suppose Maggie and Douglas will have to say about our being over fourteen hours late?"

"What *can* they say? I'm sure they'll agree we made remarkably good time considering how much trouble we had."

Logic to which I can find no adequate response.

## *Chapter Four*

Perhaps the ultimate test of a really good friend is one who doesn't mind being aroused at some absurdly early hour. Bleary-eyed and not yet quite awake, Maggie Lewis opens the door and has the decency to greet us most warmly, even if she hasn't begun to focus yet and has absolutely no idea who we are.

We exchange hugs and kisses but no hellos. It's too early for words. At last, Maggie drowsily says, "You're late."

"Yes!" answers Chris, beaming with pride.

"Very," mutters Maggie, one eye opening.

"Very what?" asks Chris blandly.

"You're very late." Two eyes. "How come?"

"It's a long story."

"Oh."

There is a twenty-second or so lapse in this stimulating conversation, during which time I get the feeling Maggie may be falling back to sleep.

Her eyes close for several moments, and when at last they open again, she mutters, "Come in."

Fifteen minutes later we're sitting in front of the fireplace, warming ourselves, sipping freshly brewed coffee.

Maggie, trying to convince us she's finally awake, talks incessantly. "There was no problem waiting. Douglas and I figured between you two driving up together, so much could go wrong, we hadn't planned to start worrying until next Tuesday. So I curled up by the fireplace while Douglas, the insensitive monster, went to bed."



"I am not an insensitive monster!" says a voice behind us.  
"I am a pussycat!"

We all turn to find Douglas, standing at the foot of the staircase, bathrobed and indignant.

"Ugh!" says Maggie. "Look who's up: Grumpy!"

Chris and I greet Douglas, who grunts hello to us and then mumbles something nasty about the lousy sleep he's had, the racket we were making which woke him, the house being too cold, his displeasure at seeing the dogs again and why isn't there a cup of coffee for him?

"Yes, Sahib," says Maggie, groveling into the kitchen.

Douglas walks over to the floor-length glass door leading to his snow-covered terrace and watches the flurries falling over the freshly whitened fields that is his spectacular front yard.

"Would you just look at this shitty weather?" he growls.

"*Snow* is shitty weather?!" barks Maggie back at him, from the kitchen. "On *Thanksgiving*—in the country, in a ski town, no less, you provincial putz!"

"Don't try to cheer me up."

Maggie returns to the living room with Doug's coffee. She hands it to him, and he complains it's not hot enough.

"Fine. You want it hotter; heat it up."

"I remember when you were sweet and innocent."

"How dare you! I was *never* sweet and innocent!"

Douglas switches hostile attentions from his wife to us.  
"And you two certainly took your fat time getting here. What the hell happened?"

"It's a long story."

"Forget it then. Long stories bore me. In fact, this whole day bores me. Fuck everybody; I'm going back to bed. Wake me when the turkey's ready." Douglas puts his coffee down, reiterating it's not hot enough, then turns and walks back upstairs.

"You know, sleep doesn't sound like such a bad idea," I submit.

"Well, I'm not at all tired," says a spritely Chris, who has now been up for twenty-four hours. "You go to bed. I'll stay



and gossip with Maggie, and we'll stuff the turkey and have a good time without you, quitter."

"Take the big guest room at the top of the stairs, Steve," shouts Maggie. "And try not to wake the ogre. If he doesn't have his solid fifteen hours, he's impossible."

"Right."

I get a solid six hours myself, waking in the early afternoon to good old-fashioned country-holiday smells: freshly crushed cranberries, pumpkin pie, sweet potato pudding.

Throwing on a pair of slacks and a sweater and going downstairs, I arrive just as the turkey is being carried out of the oven. Most of the dinner guests have arrived by now.

Five of them are new friends of Maggie and Douglas' whom I meet for the first time. The other three are old skiing companions.

Chris, sitting near the fireplace, talking to some fellow in a multi-competition-striped ski sweater, spots me and rushes over.

"Isn't he *fabulous*?" she whispers enthusiastically, planting a short kiss on my cheek.

"Who?" I whisper back, obtuse thing that I am.

"Who?" Chris raises her voice before returning to gentle whisper. "The one with the stripes. He's on the U.S. Ski team . . . second string. Douglas says he's got the strongest thighs in the East!"

"Could've fooled me."

"If I work on him through hors d'oeuvres, he'll be mine before pumpkin pie."

"Good luck."

"Don't you just worship outdoorsy types?"

"Can't get my fill."

"Oh, Steve," Chris bubbles, kissing me again, "I'm so glad we came. I just love the country!"

Glowing, she turns and heads back to the fireplace, continuing her barrage of charm on the unsuspecting skier. Poor rural fool's so behind the times, though, he appears to be working on her even harder than she is on him.

A few minutes pass before the door opens, and in walks Al Wright, which probably doesn't mean much to you, but he just happens to be Hank's best friend. And Hank, you will remember, just happens to be the guy over whom Chris tried to kill herself.

Chris takes one look at Hank's best friend, Al, taking off his ski parka, and is immediately overwhelmed with an all-encompassing Proustian relapse of depression and exhaustion. Her face drops, color drains everywhere, her eyes go blank, and she breaks out in hives all over her forearms. Turning to the second-string skier, she quietly says, "I'm suddenly so tired. I don't know what's come over me. Can't keep my eyes open. Will you excuse me?"

"Of course. No problem," says the strongest thighs in the East, bewildered. Not understanding any of it, he's probably trying to figure out where his surefire pitch backfired.

Chris, saddened and down, down, down, turns and walks over to Maggie, who's standing in the kitchen doorway.

"I'm sorry, Maggie. But I guess that trip was more tiring than I thought. If you don't mind, I'll lie down for a while."

"Sure. I understand," says Maggie, who does.

"Don't wake me. I'll get up."

"Okay."

Chris turns around, and as she approaches the stairs, she passes Al and, without ever really looking at him, says quietly, "Hi, Al . . . how've you been?" But before he can tell her how he's been, she's up the stairs and into the guest room, where she falls soundly asleep, I am sure, within moments.

We all drink and chat for another hour before sitting down to dinner. The mood is relaxed, yet anything but jovial.

Chris surprises everyone but me and Maggie by sleeping through the meal. Knowing how upset she is by Al's appearance puts me in a fairly lousy frame of mind, too. This in turn makes Maggie a good deal less than her usual bubbling hostess self. Al soon picks up the bad vibrations, and he too is down about it. Our generally subdued spirit becomes infectious and eventually spreads to the other

guests, and so we all spend a rather somber Thanksgiving dinner with our chins in our laps, Chris' conspicuously empty chair at the table not helping matters any.

The only one who seems to be having anything resembling a good time at this wake, in fact, is of course Douglas, who announces, as he serves cognac and hands out cigars at the end of the meal, that it is the nicest, warmest Thanksgiving he can recall.

Later on, when everyone retires to the warmth of the living room, I go into the kitchen and prepare a Care package of leftovers. Putting it all on a tray with a tall candle and a glass of wine, I then go upstairs.

"What time is it?" asks Chris, sitting up in bed as I arrive.

"After nine."

"I didn't mean to sleep so long," she lies.

"I know," I lie back. "Hungry?"

"Famished."

"Well, if this modest offering doesn't sustain madam, I'm sure cook can come up with something else."

"Thank you, James. Just put it down, kick out the guests, lock up the house, wash the windows, and then get yourself some rest after you've readied tomorrow's breakfast."

"Whatever madam wishes." I place the tray down in front of Chris, and there is a long time before either of us says anything. Chris very slowly opens her napkin and places it softly on her lap.

"Your eyes are swollen," I tell her. "Been crying?"

"Can you believe it? I swear I thought I was over him. Last week I had trouble remembering his name. Then his cocky friend crashes the party, uninvited; I take one look and go to pieces. Hank, that bastard. Remember how his eyes lit up when he smiled?"

"No doubt about it. He was a beauty."

"But such a prick."

"The worst."

"So why'd I fall for him?"

"He smiled well," I say, flippantly, trying to cheer her up. Chris is not amused. I get serious. "I guess Hank had more of a lasting effect on you than you thought."

"It's not that."

"No?"

"It's just that it's always the same bullshit."

"What is?"

"Men!"

"I don't understand."

"I don't either."

We each share another few uncomfortable moments of pregnant silence as Chris surveys the plate of food on her lap.

Then, ripping into a turkey leg, she says, mouth full, "I've been thinking."

For openers, I don't like her tone. "Yes?"

"I'm not having a good time."

I think we may be in trouble. "No?"

"No. Vermont is bare and desolate."

We're in trouble. "Oh, come on. You're kidding."

"I hate it. It's dreary and depressing."

She's not kidding. "Chris, that's kind of a far cry from this morning's verdict."

"What was that?"

"That was when you thought it was peaceful, lovely, serene and inviting."

"I changed my mind."

"You changed your mind?"

"Yes. I want to go home."

"Go home?" I am astounded. "Are you nuts? It took us a month to get here!"

"I don't care. I want to leave."

"Chris, think of what you're saying." Fat chance!

"I know what I'm saying. I came up here for Thanksgiving, had a lovely meal in my room and am now bored and ready to leave."

"Don't be ridiculous. The only thing waiting for us back in the city are endless auditions and the usual no thank yous."

"All right, Steve. I'll tell you what. I'll make the supreme sacrifice. *You* can do all the driving!"

"You can't seduce me with that. I'm sick of driving. I want to stay here until Monday, like we planned."

"You sound as though you didn't enjoy the trip up."

"Chris, my great-grandparents had an easier time crossing the Atlantic in steerage!"

"But we had a good time, Steve, didn't we?"

"In every twenty-hour period there are bound to be a few laughs."

"Stop it, Steve. We roared the whole way."

"That's not the way I remember it."

"That's because you refuse to look on the bright side of life."

"I refuse to look on the bright side of life? *I REFUSE TO LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF LIFE?* What about you?"

"*ME!* One would be hard pressed to find as lighthearted and carefree a spirit as the girl who lies before you."

"Oh, yeah? Well, the girl who lies before me is going to be put in a rubber room one of these days!"

"Don't start on me, Steve. I'll tear you apart."

"Go ahead. I'd like to see you try."

Poker-faced, Chris pushes aside her tray, gets up and moves toward me, slowly, gunfighter-style, a hand on each side, ready to shoot. "Pardon me, mister," she drawls, chewin' a big wad of tobaccy. "You're new in this town, ain't-cha?"

Hunching my shoulders, eyes glued straight ahead, I advance toward her with equal determination. "Yeah. What of it?"

We are nose to nose. Chris raises an eyebrow. "It's like this, stranger. This town ain't big enough for either of us."

"Nonsense." I snap my fingers. "There's plenty space 'round here for decent folk."

"Well," drawls Chris, shutting one eye tight for emphasis, "I'm giving you and me twelve hours to get out of town, see?"

"And if we don't?" I slap the sides of my chaps menacingly.



"Then I'm a-comin' lookin' fer you, buster," boasts Chris, vehemently jabbing a finger in my ribs. "You sleep with your gun?"

I grab her finger. "My gun *and* my horse."

"Aha!" cackles Chris, squirming to free her finger. "Then them stories I hear tell 'bout you and your horse are true, eh?"

I let go of her finger but then quickly clutch her wrist, emphatically. "There's nothin' to them rumors. We're just good friends."

Chris drops the drawl and the skit without warning and looks up into my eyes, quietly saying, "Just like us, huh?"

I drop the drawl too and repeat quietly, "Yeah. Just like us."

We stand still a moment, carefully studying each other. I recognize that mischievous look in her eye. Pure invitation. So I slowly put my arm securely around her slim waist and gently draw her closer to me. "Ain't we got fun?" I whisper. She smiles, and I lean forward, resting my lips against her forehead in the softest of kisses. My other hand reaches up to her chin in a gentle caress, as it slowly moves toward the back of her neck. Tilting her head very slowly up toward mine, I study the beauty in her face and soft smile for another moment and then bring my mouth down to meet hers.

Her lips part slightly, allowing my tongue to push its way past those perfect toothpaste-commercial teeth to the inside of her mouth.

Things start getting a little heavy at this point, particularly our breathing. I begin to wonder how excited I should allow myself to get, having no idea at what point she'll decide to call proceedings to an abrupt halt. And I know that wondering when to call proceedings to an abrupt halt is exactly what's going through her intricate little head right now also.

But it's not as if I've got a total say in the matter. The top half of my body is not always in agreement with the bottom part. So although my head is sending messages south to



keep cool, my lascivious lower half is growing rebellious, cutting off the wires of communication from the top.

The first outgrowth of this defiance is the erection which springs up, without my consent, mind you, from the basement of guerrilla headquarters.

Since Chris and I are as adjacent as two sticks rubbing against each other, I assume she's probably aware of this recent development as well.

But the green light is still lit, so I push on.

My hands begin roaming around the small of her back. Chris endorses this affection by releasing the slightest, most delightful audible moan of pleasure. I rub a little harder, and she moans a little louder. Dare I go on? More important, dare I stop?

I move my left hand underneath her sweater, and that feels so good I bring in the right one, too, for company, and hug her even tighter. She puts her hands around my neck, drawing closer. I know no one with her soft, loving touch. I could stand here like this, just holding her, for hours. I smile down at her and continue massaging her back. She lets me know how very much she's enjoying all this with her constant purrs of pleasure. Humming along with her, I carefully cup each of her beautifully rounded breasts in my hands. The sensation from their touch gets me so excited, I press down harder on her mouth and nibble her lower lip. She elicits another of her sexy *mmmmmmmmmmms* and, moving her hand down to my crotch, gently caresses the unauthorized beast.

Now *I'm* moaning with pleasure.

Our breathing grows still heavier.

With a slight pull, Chris releases her mouth from mine.

"We have to stop," she whispers.

"No. Let's not," I whisper back.

"Let's."

"Let's not."

"We have to go downstairs."

"We have to finish this."

"We can't."

"We can."

"We shouldn't."

"We should."

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"Good. Come here." I lead her to the bed and gently but surely press her down before slowly pushing her backward until we're both lying next to each other.

Staring at me with great severity, Chris leans her hand against my cheek fondly and waits a few moments before finally saying, "Years from now, when you think about this . . . and you will . . . be kind."

And the mood is broken.

We are both vibrating on the bed now, not in sexual encounter, but in laughter. I try getting back to the mood of the piece again, bringing my lips to hers, but the two of us begin to giggle almost immediately.

Sitting up in bed, I dump the ashes from the fake cigar in my upheld hand and raising my eyebrows, launch into my Groucho:

"Martha dear, there are many bonds that will hold us together through eternity . . . your government bonds, your saving bonds, your Liberty bonds. . . ."

Chris raises her eyebrows and says, "Thank yo."

"Thank yo," I answer, flicking an imaginary ash on the bed. "Tell me, miss, do you rumba?"

"Why, yes," Chris plays along. "I do."

"Well then, take a rumba from one to ten." I jiggle my eyebrows again.

Chris holds up a fake cigar of her own. "Have you got any stewed prunes?"

"Honk, honk." I shake my head yes.

"Well, give them some black coffee, that should sober them up!"

"Thank yo."

"Thank yo." We gaze at each other several more moments until Chris breaks the silence.

"Hey, Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"Can't we go back to the city tomorrow?"

"How about Uruguay?"

"Uruguay?!"

"Sure!" I suggest, back as Groucho. "You go Uruguay and I'll go mine!"

"Oh, come on. Please. For me, Stevie-poo. Wadda ya say, huh?"

"Well. . . ." I feel myself bending. How does she always do this to me?

Hands on hips, Chris tosses off a Mae West: "Hey, fella, I'll give ya head on the highway going home!"

That's it! I send up the white flag. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? Start packing!"

The following day starts off sunny enough but, typical of Vermont, turns overcast by early afternoon. Chris wakes with a small rain cloud of her own still floating above her head.

So, to lift her spirits, we stop off at the Swiss Pot Bar for a fast farewell drink with Maggie and Douglas.

For three hours.

Maggie insists that while she thinks she understands our early departure, she's nonetheless disappointed, and Douglas says, "What a relief. I thought you two would never leave."

Driving down Route 100, on our way out of Stowe, Chris turns back to look at the distant clouds and the pink colors drifting toward and sifting into the oranges of an early sunset.

Commenting on the beauty of the pastoral scene, she casually announces, "I wish we weren't leaving. I'm going to miss Vermont *so*."

Once again, logic to which I can find no adequate response.

## Chapter Five

The drive home from Vermont lacks the dramatics of the ride *up*. It is not, however, without lumps of its own.

Specifically, it is something in the carburetor hookup which unhooks some twenty minutes into the trip, slowing all machinery in the engine to a snail's pace, put-putting our way south, averaging a little worse than thirty-seven miles per. Which is probably good time if you're moving by covered wagon.

Somewhere around Massachusetts I remind Chris of her intent to do me on the drive home.

"Silly. I was only teasing."

"Story of my life, you shithead," I fume.

"Maybe next time."

"No next time. Hereafter we travel separately . . . by bus!"

We crawl into Manhattan a little before two in the morning. Chris and I, taken with the sight of the approaching George Washington Bridge, launch into all choruses we can remember of "America the Beautiful."

Chris drops me and the hounds off first. She's going to park the car near her apartment and call a still brooding Roger at his office in the morning, telling him where it is.

I get to my apartment where I fall asleep, even before the dogs, in fifteen minutes flat.

I hate being wakened from a sound sleep. Worse still, I hate being wakened when that dream is erotic.

I'm having one of my frequent lewdies about me and Chris going at each other, finding something to stuff into

every orifice, when the nagging ringing of the telephone brings me back to that part of our existence we sometimes refer to as reality.

Looking over at my digital, I see it is six twenty. On Saturday morning, mind you.

I pick up the receiver, mustering, "Hello, Chris."

"How did you know it was me?"

"Psychic, I guess."

"Did I wake you?"

"No. I just got in from jogging around the park."

"You sound exhausted."

"I pushed too hard."

"You're kidding me, aren't you?"

"No sense trying to pull any wool over your eyes."

"Seriously, did I wake you?"

"Yes, damn it. I was having one of our sexy dreams."

"Oh, good. Tell me about it."

"It was pretty heated. I was doing you. You were doing me. We stopped only at including the dogs."

"I'm so excited. Did you climax?"

"No. You called."

"Oh. Sorry. Why don't you go back to sleep and finish what you were dreaming? Then when you wake up, call me."

"I don't think I could do that."

"Why not? I do it all the time."

"You've had more practice. You're a professional sleeper."

"When I'm sleeping."

"When you're sleeping. Right. Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Are you crazy? Who wants to sleep? I haven't even been to bed yet! I've got the most fabulous news!"

"Who is he?"

"How did you know?"

"Told you. I'm psychic."

"You're so smart."

"Well?"

"Well . . . I'm in love!"

"I had a hunch."



"Let me tell you what happened."

"All right." I lie back in bed, placing the receiver next to my ear on the pillow in between me and Harry. "Go!"

"Well . . . oh, I'm *so* excited! . . . After I dropped you off last night, I just didn't feel like going back to an empty apartment. Too depressing. So I drove around and found a parking space right near this restaurant called the Blue Owl. You know it?"

"Columbus Avenue."

"Right. OOOH. I'm *so* excited!!"

"Chris, calm down. You're waking Harry."

"Oops. Sorry." She calms down. But not for long. "Anyway, I walked into the Blue Owl, and they've got the nicest little bar there, so I thought why not have a little nightcap. So I have a seat and order a very dry Beefeater's martini on the rocks."

"Something light to end the day."

"Right. Anyway, the bartender who makes my drink is *so* gorgeous I'm having trouble sitting on my stool. And since business is quiet, thank God, he comes over to me and we talk and his name is Bradley Forrester, don't you just love the name and he looks exactly like a Bradley too he's got these wonderful eyes and a smile so sexy with shoulders from here to there and blond curly hair oh my God you can't imagine how bright he is in medical school working nights because he comes from a lot of money but doesn't speak to his folks anymore because they had a big fight so now he's doing it on his own which I think is so commendable don't you and we talked for an hour and a half and closed up the place and he didn't charge me anything for my four drinks which was so gallant and sweet, except I've now got the most annoying hangover and he took my phone number and said he'd call today and just wait till you see him my bright beauty with dimples so deep. . . . Steve, are you listening to any of this?"

"Zzzzzzzzzzz."

"Steve!"

"Wha?"

"I said are you listening to any of this."



"Hanging onto every word."

"Good. What do you think?"

"I think it sounds very nice."

"Aren't you excited for me?"

"Very." I yawn.

"Do you think I could enjoy being married to a doctor?"

"Sure. Get all your drugs free."

"And children. I think three. Two boys and a girl. A town house in the east sixties and a summer place in East Hampton."

"Perfect."

"Or maybe Amagansett."

"Either's fine with me."

"What if he doesn't like the ocean?"

"Divorce him."

"No. We'll go to the Berkshires."

"I'm glad you worked it out."

"I'll kill myself I'm so excited you will not believe a perfect row of teeth top *and* bottom and we talked and talked and talked and OH MY GOD I'M IN LOVE! This is it, Steve! I know this is it, the real thing. I see it now. All of it. Hank was just a passing fancy. I never loved him. Plastic phony. Now that I met Bradley I know the difference between yucky and the real thing. And this is the REAL THING. I'M IN LOVE! I'M IN LOVE! *I'M IN LOVE!*"

"Chris, get ahold of yourself."

But it's too late for Chris to take hold of anything, especially herself, evidenced by her breaking into song.

"I fell in love with love one night when the moon was low. . . ."

"Chris, please. . . ."

"I was unwise with eyes too foolish to seeeee. . . ."

"Do I need this?"

"Love walked right in and yad da dad da da da."

"Chris. . . ."

"Love makes the world go 'round. Love makes the world go 'round. Somebody soon will love you, if no one loves you now."

". . . Um. . . ."

"High in some silent sky, love sings a silver song. . . ."  
". . . ."

"Love; look at the two of us. Strangers in many ways. . . ."

"Zzzzzzz."

"Steve, where are you?"

"Right here."

"Then who is snoring?"

"Ruth."

"Well, wake her and tell her I'm in love."

"She heard. That's why she went back to sleep."

"Oh."

"Anything else, Chris?"

"Anything else, what?"

"Anything else interesting happen to you last night?"

"Nope. I just fell in love."

"Well, some nights are slower than others."

"Steve, he's so intelligent, he's read Proust's entire  
*Remembrance of Things Past*."

"So have I."

"In French?"

"Got me there."

"See! He's smarter than anybody I've ever met."

"Found yourself an oracle, huh?"

"You bet."

"And that's why he's a bartender?"

"Don't knock bartenders. I think I've slept with four of them in my time. They're uncommonly sexy; standing up there in front of all those bottles. Bradley's a bartender because he's working his way through medical school, smarty. You know, if I didn't know better, I'd swear you were jealous."

"Jealous? Me? HA! You must be joking! I'm so even-keeled, I'm incapable of jealousy. . . . Wait a minute. . . . Jealous of what? Of whom? Who is this guy anyway? You meet someone who mixes martinis well, spend some time together at some dumpy bar, and you're picking out the silver pattern for the dining room. So you're in love with a smile and a matching set of dimples and maybe a brain and what am I supposed to do? Congratulate you and do cart-

wheels? Huh? Is that what you expect? Well, forget it, because if you want to know what I really think, I think the guy's got a hell of a nerve being so presumptuous, that's what I really think, because, yes, you're goddamn right, I happen to be fucking well jealous of this turd whoever he is and just let me get a hold of him and I'll break his nose."

"My day is made. My two favorite men fighting over me. I can die a happy woman."

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"He asked me out for Monday."

"I *am* going to be sick."

"Come on. Stop. We're spending the afternoon together because he works in the evening. I haven't got a thing to wear. We're meeting at the Museum of Modern Art at noon. Next to the Lipchitz. Isn't that romantic?"

"Yucchi!"

"Come on, Steve. Try and get behind it. This is really the first time I've been happy in months. You know that. Give me a little smile, will ya?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Come on, Stevie-poo. Just an iddy-biddy one for Chrissie-poo."

"Well. . . ."

"Come on, open wide for a big smiley-wiley."

". . . All right. . . ."

"Are you smiling for me?"

"Lobe to lobe."

"That's my baby. All right. I have to get off and start preparing for my date."

"Chris, your date isn't for another fifty-four hours."

"I know. But I've got a lot to do."

"I guess."

"It's never a bad idea to be organized."

"Never."

"Well. . . . I guess this is it!"

"What?"

"I'm getting off the phone."

"You make it sound so final."

"It is. We may not speak again until tomorrow evening."

"That long?"

"Unless I have something new to report."

"Right."

"Okay, Steve, good-bye. I love you."

Click.

"Good-bye," I say into the disconnected receiver. "I love you, too."

Visions of sleeping late Monday morning are blown when Rhonda Olden, my other agent who represents me for commercials, wakes me at nine, telling me I've got an audition for Sure deodorant in two hours. So perhaps it was just as well we left Vermont ahead of schedule.

I get down to the casting office a little before eleven and walk in on this mob scene affectionately known in the biz as a cattle call.

Most commercial calls will bring thirty to fifty actors in for interviews, auditions and tapings. Some, like this biggie today, see practically anyone foolish enough to subject themselves, so as many as a hundred and fifty people may be screened.

Commercial auditions are a masochist's delight.

The personification of the Catch-22 philosophy. If you're new to the game, they won't hire you for lack of experience. And when, through some pact with the devil, you do get some work, you're no longer what they're looking for because you're now overexposed.

I walk into the crowded office to register my presence, looking around at the sixty or so candidates hostilely staring back at me, sizing up my chances against theirs.

It's mostly pure Americana. The girls look like ex-captains of the cheerleaders; the guys like former senior-class presidents.

The secretary I check in with hands me a copy of the copy being tested, and I begin to study it.

And it's most enticing. Reads like a good mystery novel. In it I'm to compare some run-of-the-mill deodorant under my left armpit against Sure under my right side, until I

find, to my great olfactoried satisfaction, that Sure is tops for the pits.

Endorsements like this really turn my stomach. Maybe freedom of speech isn't such a good idea, after all. Fortunately for them, there's a sufficient number of us whory and greedy enough to ply our crafts on such contrived trash.

There's a rather attractive, bright-eyed girl standing next to me whom I recognize from a commercial I auditioned for last week.

"Excuse me." I interrupt her studying of the copy. "Didn't we read together last week on the Alpo call?"

"Right!" She flashes an enthusiastic smile. "You were the cocker spaniel!"

"And you were the French poodle!"

"Right!"

"Hi."

"Nice to see you again."

"Hey, listen," she asks pointedly, holding up the copy. "This garbage is embarrassing. Are we supposed to be sincere about this or flip or what?"

"I'm not certain. It's not easy getting worked up over deodorant, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Last week I did a Charmin commercial and got sexually aroused squeezing toilet paper."

"Flowered, colored or plain white?"

"Any of them." She laughs aloud. A high-pitched, distinctive and, yes, strange laugh. "I could get excited about train schedules. That's the trick. Make believe you've just discovered penicillin and then substitute that for whatever it is the sponsor's selling."

"Good advice."

"Yeah. I got a million of 'em. Heh-heh-heh."

"Quite a laugh you've got there."

"Yeah. Strange, huh?"

"Different."

"I know. Most of my friends won't go to comedies with me. I embarrass them."



"Is that something you developed, or did it just come naturally?"

"Combination, I guess. Most unusual, huh?"

"Kind of."

"A lot of it is nervousness, though. I laugh at funerals, and I know nothing's funny."

"What's your name?"

"Wendy. Wendy Chartoff. Heh-heh."

"Pretty funny name, huh? I'm Steve Butler."

"Hi. Actually I'm pretty depressed most of the time. I think this must be a cover."

"Could've fooled me. I've got a friend who's depressed a lot of the time, too, but to look at her you'd think she was Julie Andrews."

"Ha-ha."

"Say, uh, after the audition, would you like to join me for a cup of coffee or something?"

"Sure. Oops, that's what I'm selling. I mean yeah, fine. I have over an hour till my next call."

"Will you be able to keep a straight face during the audition?"

"Absolutely. When I'm acting, I find humor in nothing."

"Really? How's your comic style?"

"It needs work."

"I'm not surprised."

"What I'm best at is tear-your-hair-out drama. Deep-deep-deep. I find Chekhov light."

"What a coincidence. I find Woody Allen heavy."

"Ha-ha-haha-heh-heh."

Wendy and I chat a while longer, she giggling a lot until someone opens the audition room door and announces her name. Wendy's face drops to deadpan serious. Stiffening, she turns and walks into the room as though headed for a firing squad.

She comes out smiling again a few minutes later, and after waiting another fifteen minutes or so, while we continue talking and yucking it up, I'm called.

I walk into the room, am introduced to the casting lady,



the various assistants and the director before sitting down on a stool in front of a small videotape machine.

The copy for the commercial is written on cue cards in bold block letters directly below the eye of the camera. After a moment or so, the videotape machine is switched on to record this performance and I begin my ultra-sincere sell, proclaiming the joy and happiness my left armpit has found since discovering Sure.

It's not a bad reading, but neither is it cigarsville. I finish the audition, ending with a smile flashing all the enamel I can squeeze into the wide-angle lens.

There is a short pause. Nobody says anything. Nobody even breathes. All eyes go to the director, who finally issues his verdict. "Sweet," he says.

Sweet! What's a "sweet" reading?

"Thank you," the director then says, followed by three other thank yous around the room.

I thank you them back and leave, offended, humiliated, repulsed and annoyed.

"How'd it go?" asks Wendy.

"They thought I was sweet," I offer sourly.

"That's okay, ha-ha. They told me I was very sober."

"When I get home, I'm throwing away my can of Sure, and I don't give a damn how upset my left armpit gets!"

Wendy and I go to a coffee shop across the street, where we have a bite and chat about the acting scene, comparing: New York to Hollywood, theater to television, Stanislavsky to Strasberg, lines at casting calls to lines at unemployment offices.

I take her number, suggesting we might get together soon. She thinks it's a fine idea, giggles again and rushes off to her next audition. I go home to prepare for Chris' call, which I know is coming later this afternoon, most anxious to learn how her date with Mr. Right has gone.

Just before five thirty, the phone rings.

"Hello?" I answer, feigning nonchalance.

But all I hear on the other end is heavy breathing. At first I think perhaps it's not Chris, after all, and I may be getting

an obscene phone call. Eventually, however, Chris interrupts her breathing to say, "I can't catch my breath!"

"Slow down."

"I'm trying."

"How'd it go?"

"I can't speak yet."

"All right. *I'll* talk."

"Good."

"I met a girl at the Sure call today. Wendy Chartoff. We really hit it off well and went out afterward. . . ."

"Steve, this is definitely it!"

"You think so?"

"Absolutely."

"You think it's love, Chris?"

"I'm convinced."

"But I just met her."

"Who?"

"Wendy!"

"Who's Wendy?"

"The girl I was just talking about."

"When?"

"Not Wen. Wendy!"

"When were you talking about Wen-Dee?"

"Just now."

"We weren't talking about Wendy anybody just now. We were waiting for me to catch my breath so I could tell you about my day but I don't think I ever will I'm so winded I ran up all three flights skipping every other step mind you and then by the time I unlocked all four locks took off my coat threw off my shoes said hello to all my plants went to my refrigerator and gobbled down six very delicious cherry tomatoes I was so hungry I couldn't wait to call you so here I am and wait until you hear what happened!"

Chris pauses for three quick breaths before continuing. "It was only the most fabulous day of my life that's all I don't know where to begin well at the beginning I suppose we met at the museum and strolled around between the Picassos and the Matisses, hand in hand, like a couple of high school sophomores discovering love for the first time. And Steve,

he is so smart he knows why everything exhibited there is whatever contribution it is to the art movement and his insights into paintings are so astute I never would've dreamed anyone that gorgeous could be so deep I'm so glad I took that Understanding of Modern Art course at Indiana or I really would've been lost talk about dividends, huh? We went window shopping along Fifth Avenue and the Christmas displays are so beautiful we walked all the way to the Plaza where we lunched at a teddibly chic hot dog stand on a couple of wieners, mustard/sauerkraut, hold the onions and a bottle of Hires root beer and walked into the park as we ate and dribbled all over ourselves laughing laughing laughing until we got to the zoo which was empty I guess because it was so chilly that most of the animals stayed inside except of course the seals who were having the most exciting game of tag around the pool. Steve, he held my hand as we walked into the lion house. Can you imagine? He put his arm around me when we visited the elephants and then a little later on when I complained of an itchy back he stood behind me and massaged my shoulders and I practically had an orgasm right there in the monkey house standing between a gorilla and an orangutang and oh my God the best is yet to come we took a taxi home and he kissed me good-bye and let me tell you it was a good thing I was sitting down because my knees buckled isn't that incredible and I invited him up for a quick drink or anything else he could squeeze into the forty-five minutes he had before getting to work but he said no, he'd rather come back when he has more time oh Steve I'm so excited he didn't want to just slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am me like everyone else he really paid attention to what I was saying and HE DOESN'T JUST THINK OF ME AS AN OBJECT AND HE'S THE FIRST MAN IN YEARS WHO LIKES ME FOR ME AND NOT JUST MY BODY and you don't suppose there's something wrong with him do you oh I'm driving myself crazy I know he's got to be the best thing that's ever happened I wonder when he'll call again he's from Minnesota isn't that a wonderful place to be from I'm sure his family will love me when we go home every year for

Thanksgiving with the kids; even though I'm not the girl-next-door type he said they'd love me in Minnesota because there's no one there quite like me and I don't mean to be doing all the talking tell me how your day went."

"What?"

"I asked how your day went."

"Oh. . . . I met a girl at the Sure audition. Wendy."

"Wendy who?"

"Why do I get the impression we've played this scene already?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Wendy Chartoff. She has this really terrific smile that—"

"Talk about smiles I've never seen so many teeth on a man."

"Like a shark, huh?"

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"No. It was supposed to be nasty. I just said it funny."

"Are we going to have another of our jealous tantrums, Steve?"

"Of course not."

"Then what is the problem?"

"No problem. I'd just like to have a little equal time. I've heard all about your friend and I was just selfishly trying to steal a few seconds to tell you about Wendy, that's all."

"Wendy who?"

"Chris. . . . Do you have anything else to tell me?"

"I don't think so."

"All right, then . . . I'm really glad you've had a terrific day with this guy. I hope this time it really works out. No one deserves a break with love as much as you. Okay?"

"I'll buy that."

"Fine. And Wendy and I hope you and Bradley can come for dinner Thursday evening."

"What!"

"Check your calendar and let us know."

"WENDY WHO?" screams Chris.

Click.

I look at my watch.

Seventeen seconds pass before the phone rings again.

"Hello?" I inquire lazily.

"Who's Wendy?" demands Chris, mid-laughter.

"You must have the wrong number. There's no Wendy here."

"You hung up on me, Steve!" She laughs.

"Yes."

"*You* hung up on me!" Laughing harder.

"Right."

"You hung up on *me*!" Laughing still harder.

"You noticed."

"I can't believe you just hung up on me. If I weren't so hysterical, I'd be furious. Consider yourself lucky I fell in love today. Otherwise I'd have your ass in a sling. There are no limits to my patience when love is in the air. Now. Are you sorry you hung up on me?"

"I guess."

"Do you still love me?"

"Now and forever."

"Promise."

"Promise."

"We're friends again?"

"Of course."

"Good. Now there's just one more question I have to ask and then I'll get off the phone, okay?"

"Okay."

"You don't mind."

"I don't mind."

"You're sure?"

"Shoot."

"Okay. . . . WHO THE FUCK IS THIS WENDY AND WHAT DOES SHE WANT WITH YOU?"



## Chapter Six

"Next!"

The voice is strong, weighted and brash. Just the tone one might expect from this huge blond woman.

"Who's next?" She demands to know.

"I think I am," I say timidly, hoping she won't raise her voice at me.

"Who are *you*?" She raises her voice.

"Steve Butler."

"Butler, Butler, Butl . . ." she repeats, gliding a stubby finger down a long list of names. "Oh, yes! Steve Butler."

"That's me."

"You're next!" she says informatively, opening the door to the rehearsal hall.

"Thank you," I answer, following her inside.

It is the next day and I'm at an audition for a touring company production of *Barefoot in the Park*. This one to travel to three theaters on the Florida circuit, for three weeks.

Like most actors, I hate to leave New York and work on the road. And like most actors, I find that in order to pay the rent and build work credits, I must. Theatergoers are different on the road. Attentive, gracious and responsive, they spoil you for the big time.

Out of town, Mickey Rooney could get a standing ovation reading the Yellow Pages. On the Great White Way, Olivier doing the definitive *Hamlet* would have New Yorkers

halfway up the aisles, hurrying to claim their cars from parking lots, before the final duel.

But don't get me wrong.

I'll take the rudeness of New Yorkers any day just to be working here because, for all its death notices, Broadway is still the final proving ground, still the Mecca toward which we aspire.

So, like lemmings to the sea, we go on.

I am introduced to the director and producer of this Florida-bound group and then audition with the hefty blond woman I've just followed in.

We read the fight scene at the end of the second act. I'm playing a twenty-six-year-old newlywed. This fifty-year-old blond chubba is supposed to be my perky young wife of six days. So it's a little difficult relating to her.

Fortunately, the role is something of a piece of cake for me at this point anyway. I've played it four times over the years in summer stock. So I already fairly well know just where the laughs are and how to pull them.

We finish the reading. The director says he likes it, thanks me for coming in, says they have a lot of people to see, but I just may hear from them.

I thank the director and follow my big blond friend back into the hallway, where she commands of the fifteen or so gathered actors, "All right! Who's next?"

Riding the subway to the Village, I meet Chris for lunch. Afterward I go with her to the audition she has for a new musical revue about life in New York called *Another Straw!*

She sings two songs, reads a monologue from one of the skits, improvises a dance routine for them inspired by a diffident drummer who beats out a monotonous rhythm, is thanked, and the two of us leave.

Traveling in the crowded subway back uptown, Chris and I compare notes on how our various auditions went this day. When we get to my place, we relax for a few hours before going into the kitchen to cook some dinner.

"I'm *so* depressed!" Chris tells me, tossing the pasta into boiling water.

"What about?" I ask, as if I didn't know.

"Oh, lots of things."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Like that audition this afternoon. I sang, I read, gave them everything outside of standing there naked with my hair on fire, and they were so unresponsive."

"A quick thank you and 'Who's next?,' huh?"

"Practically."

"Well, it doesn't pay to get worked up about it. You just never know what's going on in their minds."

"Or what they're looking for."

"Right. Chris, I've had producers react so enthusiastically to an audition they did everything but burst into applause. And afterward I'd never hear from them. Other times I've done really shitty work and got called back the next day."

"It's a lousy business."

"The worst."

"So why do we do it, Steve?"

"We do it because we're crazy and because we love to perform and because it's there."

"When I make it to the top, I'm never going to forget the little people."

"You're too humble; that's one of your problems."

"And what about Bradley?"

"I had a hunch we'd get around to that. All right, what about him?"

"He hasn't called or anything."

"Chris," I say somewhat exasperatedly, spooning the tomato paste into the sauce, "you only saw him yesterday."

"If he's playing it cool when I'm dying to see him, I'll be very upset."

"He may not call for days."

"I'll kill myself."

"I don't blame you."

"Pass the salt."

I hand Chris the salt.

"Stick out your tongue."

"I beg your pardon."

"I said stick out your tongue." Chris demonstrates by sticking out her own tongue.

So I stick out my tongue.

"Now open wide and say *Ahhhhhhhhh*."

"Chris, this is silly."

"Do as I say!"

"*Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh*."

"That's good!" And, saying so, Chris dumps the entire contents of the salt shaker, of which she has just unscrewed the top, right on my tongue.

I am a thirty-year-old person. A serious student of the drama. And I am now standing in front of a hot stove with a mountain of salt on my tongue.

Hurrying over to the sink, I spit out most of it, then gargle with a glass of water. When I am at last able to speak, I turn to Chris, who looks like a contented cow, and criticize, "A bit too salty, I think. Could hardly taste the spaghetti."

"Serves you right for even joking about Bradley not calling me," retorts Chris playfully, placing the spaghetti strainer on her head and saluting.

Not to be outdone, I pick up a head of lettuce, stuff it down the front of my pants and return the idiotic salute.

Giggling, Chris rushes from the kitchen, returning moments later from the bathroom with a container of my shaving cream. "Why hasn't he called me, Steve?" She pouts. "I can't stand it!"

"He will. Just relax," I say, placatingly, barely noticing the slightest impatience in my voice.

Chris stiffens her upper lip, rolls her eyes and launches into her Stan Laurel. "And what's more, Ollie . . . I didn't like that crack about the mustard seed!" As she speaks, she covers the top of my head in oozing shaving foam. "Take that, you rat!" she continues, dramatically. "The very idea he may not call for days. Steven, you're awful. Just awful!"

My upper lip is pursed now, as I go into Humphrey Bogart: "Sho ya wanna play rough, huh, shister?"

Chris gulps dramatically, feigning fear. I pick up a huge butcher knife, point it at her, then turn to the counter

where I cut a thin slice of tomato, which I then casually drop down the front of her blouse. "I don't want to hear any more about Bradley. Okay? It's enough."

Without so much as a beat, Chris turns, opens the refrigerator door, pulls out the plastic pitcher of ice water and tauntingly and vengefully singsongs, "Brad-ley . . . Brad-ley . . . Brad-ley!" before emptying the contents directly upon the shaving cream already embedded on the top of my head, drowning me in a sea of chilled water.

"*I'm melting! I'm melting!*" I cackle sinisterly with pointed, open-clenched fingers like the Wicked Witch of the West as I make an agonizingly slow descent to the floor, where I collapse in a clump.

Wiping her hands of the whole mess, Chris casually steps over my lifeless form, on her way into the living room, gingerly bemoaning, "I wish I weren't so depressed. I'd really enjoy having all this fun if Bradley were here playing with us."

Picking up my wet, freezing head, I yell into the other room, "Will you forget about Bradley for five fucking minutes? You're here with *me!*"

"Please, Steve. Don't get boring," says Chris flatly.

"BORING?" I roar, storming into the bathroom. "Look who's talking!"

I shower to cleanse the gook from my body, while Chris mops up the mess in the kitchen and finishes preparing the meal.

We sit down to eat, and as I pour the wine, Chris finds she has little appetite since working herself into a mini-state over not having heard from you-know-who.

"I'm too exhausted to continue playing the clown, Chris."

"Quite all right. I prefer feeling icky anyway."

"Well, don't wallow in it."

"I'm not wallowing, Steven."

"What then?"

"Floating."

"You're floating on ickyness?"

"You might say."

"Isn't that a little silly for a girl supposedly in love?"



"I am not in love. I'm miserable. If that shmuck hasn't the decency to call, it's all over. Fuck him."

"Why so vehement?"

"Because I'm in love," frets Chris.

"Oh," I say softly, summoning a comeback. "Well, maybe he called, but you weren't in."

Chris' face lights up in temporary wonder. "Of course!" she shrieks. "Why didn't I think of that? He's probably calling me right now. Oh, that's it. How dumb-dumb-dumb. I'm here, picking at my food when I should be home waiting for his call."

"But. . . ."

"No buts about it!" insists Chris, pounding the table with her fist. "He's probably calling right now. Good. Let him wait!" she concludes with conviction.

"Huh?" I ask, mystified.

"Let him think I'm out with someone else."

"Why?"

"Why not?" she demands.

"I. . . ."

"But then again . . . what if he doesn't call back?" she asks, suddenly surprisingly upset.

"Don't worry," I assure her. "He'll call back."

Growing visibly agitated now, Chris taps her fingers nervously on the tabletop. "And what if the romance is over?" she asks, distressed, chewing on a thumb.

"Then it doesn't matter," I answer in a foolish flight of reason.

"Doesn't matter?" Chris raises her voice, displaying the slightest bit of hostility. "Are you mad, Steve? For God's sake. Of course it matters. I'm in love and my darling's been trying to reach me and you know how difficult it must be for him to leave the bar to make a phone call. Poor thing. I'll call *him!*"

"Now?" I ask, confused.

"Of course. Oh, why didn't I think of this before? Why didn't you?"

"Because I know better."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's the only thing to do."

"Chris, I'm serious. He won't like that. Throwing yourself at him, coming on so strong, is a big mistake."

"I don't care. I'm going to call him."

"You are not!" I insist.

"I am too!"

"*You are not!*" I raise my voice.

"*I AM TOO!*" Chris tops me.

"*YOU ARE NOT!*" I holler.

Chris pushes back her chair, knocking it over, as she stands with determination and heads for the telephone. I jump up and, racing to the desk, get there first. Placing the telephone behind my back, I stand defiantly erect.

"Give me that phone!" growls Chris.

"No!" I stand firm.

"I'm not playing with you!"

"I'm not playing with you, either."

"This is not your business, Steve!"

"It is too!"

"It is not!"

"It is too, damn it!"

"Give me the phone!"

"NO!"

"*GIVE ME THE GODDAMN PHONE!*"

"NO!"

Chris jabs me in the ribs, hard, taking me by surprise. As she stretches around and manages to wrest the phone from me, I lurch forward and grab it back again. She hangs on. I pull. She tugs. I pull back.

"Chris, let go, damn it!" I pull, getting really annoyed.

"NO!" she insists, tugging.

"LET GO!" I pull, clenching my teeth.

"NO!"

Back and forth. Back and forth.

"*I-SAID-LET-GO-CHRIS-GOD-DAMN-IT!*"

"*I-SAID-NO!*"

"*I-SAID-YES!*"

Back and forth.

"NO!"

**"YES!"**

**"LET GO!"**

**"NO!"**

**"Yes!"**

**"No!"**

**Whack!**

I haul off, sending a fierce open-handed slap directly across her face, flushing her cheek beet red.

Both of us stand stunned for what seems a very long three-quarters of a second, recovering from the sting. Finally, I extend the phone to her, saying quietly, "Jesus, I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. Here. Make the call."

"I don't want to," says Chris, turning her back on me.

"I insist."

"Go to hell."

"Aw, come on."

"You hate me!"

"I do not!"

"You hit me!"

"You deserved it."

"I did not. It hurts."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't forgive you."

I extend the phone to her again. "Here. Take it."

"Screw you. I don't want it."

"All right. I'll do it." Dialing information, I get the number of the Blue Owl, call the restaurant and ask for Bradley. When he gets on the line, I hand the telephone to Chris. She hesitates at first but finally accepts it. Switching on her siren voice in an amazing recovery worthy of Bernhardt, she seductively says hello and then asks if he'd like to come over to her place after he gets off work.

There is a long silence on our side of the wire, and all I can hear is the buzz of whatever it is Bradley's saying.

Chris listens attentively a few more moments and then calmly says, "I wouldn't count on it," before she hangs up.

"What was that all about?"

"Nothing," says Chris sharply, scratching at a newly

arrived hive on her forearm. "I invited him over. He said it was impossible tonight . . . maybe some other time. I told him not to count on it."

"But why?"

"Because I'm not a toy. He can't just control me when he wants."

"But maybe he *can't* make it tonight!"

"Why not?"

"How do I know why not?"

"Whatever he's doing is not as important as breaking it if he really wanted to see me."

"Chris. I have seen you personally go out of your way before to screw up and destroy relationships, but this time you're outdoing even your own self-destructive self!"

"Name me one thing I've ever done that was self-destructive!"

"Are you serious!? What would you call last year's trip to St. Vincent's emergency room?"

"A passing fancy."

"Well, the next time a similar fancy passes—please—DO IT IN YOUR OWN APARTMENT!"

"Don't start with me, Steve!"

"Always playing games instead of just coming clean. What if you've turned him off for good?"

"Fine. It'll give me something else to be upset about."

"How you love to wallow in that bullshit self-pity. Jesus!"

"I won't have you psychoanalyzing me, Steve. I've already fired two shrinks. I don't need it from you. I'll wallow where I want."

"Go ahead, damn it!" I raise my voice. "But if you spend so much time floating around and wallowing down in the dumps. . . ." I trail off, not wishing to finish the thought.

"Yeah?" Chris pursues.

"Well . . . one of these days you just may wind up sinking."

"Profound City! What time is the next lecture? I wouldn't miss Sunrise Sermon with you for the world."

"Come on. Don't be difficult."

"I'm going home!"

"GOOD IDEA!" I roar.

"I'm depressed."

"Congratulations. I knew you could get there if you worked at it."

"Sorry to leave you with the dishes," Chris tosses off lightly.

"That's the least of our problems," I mumble.

Chris gets her coat and starts for the door. I open it for her. Reaching out, she shakes my hand, saying, "Thanks for the whipping."

"Don't mention it."

"And the dinner."

"*WHAT DINNER? NOBODY ATE!*"

"Don't yell. You know, Steve," she says with conviction, walking into the hallway, "the trouble with you is your outlook on life."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. You're just so fucking *healthy!*"

Our lives weave intricate, fluctuating patterns. As the feller says, when you're up, you're up.

The next day the planets must move into a new house, the sun and moon must be at peace with all forces, and the stars must obviously be smiling down upon us.

In the morning I get a call from Pat, at the William Morris office.

"Hello?"

"Congratulations! Congratulations!"

"Pat?"

"Guess who's going to Florida for three weeks?"

"I got the part?"

"You bet your ass you got the part!"

"Terrific!"

"They just called with the good news. Of course I fleeced them for fifty more per week than they were ready to spring. Cheap bastards. Sign the contract and pick up the script at their office tomorrow. . . . What? . . . Who? . . . Tell them I'll call back. You there, Steve?"

"Right here, Pat. Have you heard anything about *March into April?*"



"*March into April?* Oh, right. The play! Not a phone call. But word on the street is they've got money problems. Who doesn't, huh? Is this a shitty business or what? We must all be crazy, no?"

"I guess."

"What? . . . Who? . . . Hold on a minute, Steve. The other line."

I'm switched over to Hold, where I wait patiently a couple of minutes until Pat comes back on the line.

"Steve! You still there?"

"Haven't moved."

"Good. . . . What? . . . What? . . . Oh, shit, Joan. Not again. . . . Steve, I gotta take this other call."

"Go ahead."

"I'll talk to you later. . . . What line is he on? . . . What? . . . 506?. . . Well, why didn't you say so?" Click.

As soon as I hang up, the phone rings again.

"Hello?"

"Steve?" summons a subdued, coquettish Chris.

"Hi!" I greet her back enthusiastically.

"Listen. I've had a good night's rest and a lot of talking with myself, and I'm sorry about walking out on dinner. You're not mad, are you?"

" 'Course not."

"When I go a little nutsy, it's probably best to just wait it out."

"I understand. Don't say another word."

"You're the best. Well, I've got great news."

"Me too."

"Fabulous. You first."

"No. You."

"Okay. Well, two things. First, I just found out I got that Clairol commercial I read for last week."

"Hey! Congratulations."

"Yeah. It's for a new shampoo they're putting out called Breeze, and it's to be a big national campaign, so my agent said I stand to make a good five or six thousand on it, at least."

"That's great. Just great."

"And I also got a callback for *Another Straw*, that revue you went with me to yesterday."

"This is it, kid. You're on your way!"

"I hope so. What about you?"

"Well . . . I'm going to Florida . . . *Barefoot in the Park!*"

"Congratulations! You can't!"

"Can't what?"

"You can't go!"

"Why not?"

"How can you leave at a time like this? We still don't know what's happening between me and Bradley."

"Well, Chris. You'll just have to work twice as hard to resolve it by the time I leave."

"What a challenge to my feminine mystique!"

"You can handle it."

"I know."

Chris and I go out to dinner that evening to celebrate our newfound work. We have a terrific time except once every ten minutes or so when she lapses into a momentary melancholic stupor over her up-in-the-air situation with her bartender friend. But I tickle her toes under the table or make some dumb face or tell a lousy joke, and she snaps right out of it.

Later on, around midnight, I'm preparing for bed when the phone rings.

"Hello."

"*HE CALLED!*"

"Hi, Chris."

"*HE CALLED!*"

"Bradley?" I catch on fast.

"Of course. Thank God we didn't stay out too late. He just phoned and asked if he could come over to see me once he got off work."

"So you're happy?"

"Thrilled!"

"You see. Some days things go the way we wish they would every day."

"Sounds like a fortune cookie."

"I . . ."

"Steve, I can't babble on like this. I've got to get ready. Just wanted to let you in on the good news."

"Okay. I'm delighted for you. Call me tomorrow with details."

"I know it's going to be only glorious!"

"Good night."

"Good night and hallelujah!"

I go to sleep and Chris hurries about to prepare: Cleopatra awaiting Antony. Juliet listening for Romeo. Héloïse greeting Abélard. Beatrice enticing Benedick. Helen seducing Paris. Tristan shuffling Isolde.

The following morning we have take two: a repeat of the early morning brunch sequence with which we started our story.

This time Chris allows me and the bulldogs to sleep until seven fifteen before ringing my door bell.

"Well, you can go to Florida. Don't worry about me, anymore!" she sings, walking right past me, into the kitchen.

"Really?"

"I'M SO IN LOVE!"

"I had a hunch," I offer calmly, following her like one of the pups.

"Sorry I woke you, but I just had to talk and knew you probably couldn't sleep, worrying about me so. You don't mind, do you? Of course you don't; what are good friends for if you can't make them breakfast and tell them of your good fortune and have I got good fortune to tell you about? How it is possible for one man to be so good in bed without bottling his technique is beyond me! We were at it forever. Forever! He just left an hour ago. He was so incredible, Steve, just like Old Faithful, every hour on the hour, dependable as Big Ben. And as for me, well, multiple orgasms. WAVES OF MULTIPLE ORGASMS. Do you have any idea what it's like to have waves of multiple orgasms? My, my, my. . . ." Chris finally trails off, exhaling a long, lingering sigh of blissful contentment. "I suppose I should ask how you want your eggs."

"I'm not sure."

"Well, how about poached, basted, boiled or coddled?"

"No. I mean I'm not sure I know what it's like to have waves of multiple orgasms."

"There's absolutely nothing like it, Steve. What can I tell you?"

"How about sunny side up?"

"What?"

"My eggs."

"Steven, I thought we were discussing my sexual estheticisms, do you think I really care how you want your eggs?"

"Then why'd you ask?"

"You caught me in a weak moment. You needn't take me so literally."

"I'm too insensitive. Forgive me." I bow humbly.

Chris puts the packages down on the counter and begins unpacking them. "All right"—she sighs—"I can see myself getting no place with you this morning until you're fed. Honestly, Steve, just like the goddamned animals in the jungle. No soul. No sensitivity. That's what's really wrong with you. If you're not interested in my love life, I may as well start cooking. I still love you, though, despite your hopelessly selfish nature and want you to know that Bradley, the kids and I expect you over to the house every Christmas Eve for tree trimming, eggnog and presents. In spite of your heinous behavior."

"I'll be there."

"Good. *Now* . . . one egg, or two?"

We settle down to a hearty breakfast of undercooked bacon and overcooked eggs for us and cottage cheese and buttered whole wheat toast for the dogs, and I'm not sure who got the better meal. At least Ruth and Harry don't have to listen to Chris going on and on and on and on about every aspect of the glorious evening before. When I interrupt her over our third cup of coffee, suggesting she finally approach the denouement of her adventure, she looks at me slightly aghast.

"What you're trying to say, Steve, is that I've become a boring old hag, is that it?"

"Something like that."

"Oh." There is a long, long pause during which only the snoring of the contented post-breakfasted Ruth is heard, until at last Chris says, "So then he got up, went to the kitchen and came back with this purple jar. Well, my dear, have you ever gotten it on with grape jelly? Wow! . . ." Unimpressed by my stifled yawns, she has again picked up exactly where she had left off.

And so, envying Ruth who sleeps through all this, I sit quietly, shuffling my feet under the table, not listening to the rest of the bacchanal which Chris is reliving.

Finishing her vivid re-creation of the previous evening at last, Chris is mercifully suddenly gripped with the need to sleep.

Rising from the table and walking over to the kitchen window, she stares out at my colorful view of the back wall of the building next door, twenty feet away, reflecting thoughtfully, "Do you know there are people out there in that utopia of suburbia who *never* do it? Once a year. Passionless. Sex has passed from their involvement forever. Or was never any kind of great shakes to begin with. Can you think of anything sadder?"

"Not if that's what they want."

"What do they know about what they want? They've never experienced the bliss of glorious sex. Poor creatures. Quite a communication, all that lovemaking. I wouldn't be without it."

"You also wouldn't be so hung up without it."

"Don't confuse me. I'm exhausted enough to believe most anything. Good night." She leans over and kisses the top of my head.

"Sweet dreams," I offer, looking up at her.

Chris curls up in my bed with the dogs, and I dress and bicycle down to the Floridian producer's office to pick up a *Barefoot* script.

The next morning I again accompany Chris down to the



Village on that revue callback. And, of course, a talented woman in love can do no wrong. She belts out the songs she's brought with even more flair and sale than usual. Her comic timing on the skit she is asked to perform is precise and letter-perfect. Even the improvisation—something to do with being trapped in an elevator with three monks—works out hilariously well.

The producers say they're very impressed, thank you and good-bye.

Remembering the stars are now smiling upon us, I'm not at all surprised when, the next day, Chris calls to say she just returned from her third callback, where she performed again without flaw. She says the producers contacted her agent, a deal has been worked out and . . . she got the part!

We cheer a lot over the wires until Chris goes on to report more good news. Seems Bradley just called to say he's been thinking of nothing but her since the other evening and asked if he could come back to see her again tonight.

Perhaps there is a goddess, after all.

The phone doesn't ring again until four o'clock.

In the morning.

"Hello!" I somehow summon, practically bumping Harry off the bed in my effort to reach the phone.

"Not so loud!" comes the whisper on the other end.

"Chris?" I whisper back, following orders.

"Yes," she still whispers.

"What the hell!" I whisper.

"I had to call you. I had to tell someone. I'm in love."

"Chris, that's old news."

"I know. Sssh. You'll wake Bradley."

"Where is he?"

"Lying next to me. His arm is locked over my stomach, and I'm having trouble breathing, but I wouldn't budge for the world."

"Smart girl."

"Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"He told me tonight that I'm so important to him, not just

another lay, that he purposely put off coming over to see me that first night I called him."

"You call this information worth waking a person at four in the morning?"

"There's more."

"That's different."

"I love you . . . very much."

"That's nice. I love you, too."

"I wasn't talking to you."

"What?"

"I said that to Bradley. Oh, not that I don't love you. I do love you, of course. But I just whispered that last 'I love you' to him. You don't mind, do you?"

"Certainly not."

"Good. He sleeps so cutely. Like a teddy bear."

"Chris, you're making me nauseous."

"Sorry."

"Is there anything else, Chris? I'm fading fast."

"Yes. As he fell asleep, he spoke. He rolled over into my arms and said—are you ready for this?—he said, 'I wish I could stay here forever.' "

"Go on."

"That's it."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"Chris, I have to be up for rehearsal in four hours. If it's all the same to you, I'd like to continue this whisper during daylight hours."

"You know, it's amazing. I always forget how insensitive you are."

"INSENSITIVE?"

"SSSSSssssh!"

"Insensitive?"

"You don't know what love is all about."

"Well, maybe, Chris, just maybe, one day you'll teach me."

"If you're lucky."

"If I'm lucky? I can't believe you could actually wake me at

this absurd hour with some *sotto voce* trivia not even worth—"

"Please, Steve," she interrupts with a whisper, "I'm too exhausted. I'm going to sleep. Call me tomorrow and I'll fight with you then."

"Chris . . . don't you dare hang up on—"

Click.

"—me." I slam the dead receiver down, punch my pillow around and, flopping over on my stomach to attempt vainly falling back to sleep, yell to Harry, "SHE'S A VERY CRAZY LADY!"

I don't hear from or get to see Chris much after that. I'm soon knee-deep into eight- and ten-hour rehearsals, hoping we'll get this *Barefoot* off the ground. All-day rehearsals and run-throughs are exhausting, so my nights are fairly quiet with dinner and then a review of my lines, over and over, until I fall asleep to whatever is the oldest movie I can find on the tube.

As for the kid, she's in love and off in never-never land, seeing Bradley quite late most every night, then getting up early to travel down to the Village, where she's started rehearsals for her revue. It seems a promising venture, with bright, witty material, some good music and eight talented kids—five boys, three girls.

They plan to rehearse about three weeks before opening after the first of the year in some small theater in the Village. This works out nicely since I'll just be returning from the sun circuit by then.

Stuck somehow in between all this harried activity, Chris spends three hectic days running all over Manhattan shooting her Clairol Breeze commercial.

Our schedules are now so conflicting, in fact, we don't get to see each other until I stop at her place, just before leaving.

Taking a taxi to her apartment, I tell the cabby, "I'll be down in a few minutes, just have to drop these dogs off, say good-bye, and then we'll be off to the airport."

The meter on the cab is ticking, and I leave my luggage with the suspicious driver as collateral for my eventual return.

Chris is running around as I arrive, placing candles around the apartment for her get-together with Bradley later that evening. She seems up, relaxed and truly enjoying herself.

Neither of us could be happier that things have finally started going in the right direction for a change, marred slightly only by my being away for the holidays. But we promise each other a private late Christmas of our own once I return. Chris even pledges to keep her tree up until we've exchanged our gifts in early January. Promising to call at least once a week from down South, I hold and kiss her with great affection.

"Good-bye, love," I say.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart," she returns.

"I'll miss you."

"And I'll miss you."

"You know, if someone were listening to this, they'd probably think we were in love or something."

"Well, we are, aren't we?" Chris asks.

"Come on. You know what kind of love I mean."

"I do?"

"Sure," I answer. "We love each other. But we're not *in love*."

"What's the diff?"

"The diff is difficult to describe. My bags are packed. The dogs are sniffing about for secret places to pee, there's a taxi waiting downstairs to whisk me to the airport, I'll be away three weeks, and you expect me to dissect our relationship here and now?"

"If you like."

"Well, I haven't the time."

"All right."

"Let's just say for now that I love you and you love me, but you love Bradley more, so he's the flame of the moment and I'm just old reliable."

"That's not bad."

"But is it right?"

"Partly. What you don't understand is that my thing for Bradley has nothing to do with my love for you."

"What are you saying *now*?" Suddenly I feel this paralyzing sexual rush flowing through my gonads. There's a mischievous glint in Chris' eyes suggesting she's feeling the same thing, too.

"I'm not saying anything." She smiles. "Just that I can keep my affections attached and separated."

Chris draws closer. Pressing her lips to mine, she gently pushes her tongue into my mouth, and I know I've got to get out of this right away or I'll never get to Florida, let alone the airport.

As gently as I can, I remove her arms from around my neck and take a short step back.

"Chris. This is really crazy."

"Why?"

"Because you always pick the strangest moments to turn on to me."

"I can't help it. I warned you it could happen at any time."

"But why now?"

"How should I know? You're leaving. I felt saddened. You look incredibly sexy, and so here I am. Take me."

"God damn it!" I shout. "I've got a taxi waiting downstairs costing me ten cents every thirty seconds we talk. I've waited five years for this moment and refuse to make love to you in the ten minutes I could conceivably spare while a meter is ticking off downstairs. It would be more like a stunt on *Beat the Clock*! YOU ARE A CARD-CARRYING LOONEY TUNE AND CAN JUST BE GRATEFUL THAT I LOVE YOU AND PUT UP WITH THIS SHIT BECAUSE NO SANE MAN WOULD TOLERATE IT. GOOD-BYE!"

I give her one final, very short kiss on the lips and, opening the door to leave, turn back and shout, "WHEN I RETURN, I'M NOT GOING TO WAIT FOR PERMISSION ANYMORE. THE NEXT TIME THE URGE HITS I'M GOING TO BALL YOU ON THE SPOT! IS THAT CLEAR?"



Nonplussed, Chris blows at her fingernails. "Okay, stud"—she yawns—"I'll be waiting for you."

Slamming the door, I bang my way down the stairs. Chris opens the door and calls after me.

"Steve!"

"WHAT?" I yell up from the landing below, still seething.

"That was *so* sexy I almost had an orgasm."

"Congratulations. Multiple or run-of-the-mill?"

"How should I know? It never arrived."

"Just a rush, huh?"

"Exactly."

"Good. Well, in case you're interested, that was so sexy I now have a pair of blue balls."

"Congratulations. Multiple or run-of-the-mill?"

"Chris?"

"What?"

"Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas."

I storm out of the building and into the taxi. Looking up, I see Chris leaning out the window, waving to me. I wave back, and as the taxi drives off, I can hear her yelling after me, "I love you!"

# INTERMISSION



## Chapter Seven

Working in front of Florida audiences is a lot like looking at the ocean: waves of blue hair.

I'd be surprised if some of the older, wealthier matrons here in Wrinkle City didn't check into the ladies' room at intermission for a pint of blood.

The glitter from the incredible neckware, the mammoth rings, the weighted bracelets, the drooping earrings and the staggering pins is all so brilliant the audience is almost better lit than the set.

In this society the women go to the theater, and the men, those still alive, sit on boat decks, playing pinochle.

It's provincial territory, too. You do not bring *Oh! Calcutta!* to the likes of the Poinsettia Playhouse in Palm Beach. No. You bring them *Barefoot in the Park* and even then must blue-pencil some of the snappier dialogue.

The old ladies are most receptive, though. I must give them that. And they really get into it!

When I have a fight with my bride, Corie, and am relegated to sleeping on the couch in the living room, you can almost feel the weight of disappointment hanging over the audience like a dark cloud. Forget the plane crash on the six o'clock news. *This is real tragedy!*

Similarly, in the third act, when we make up and are again friends, the audience, practically in unison, breathes one heavy sigh of relief, and the ominous cloud is lifted.

The road can be a fairly lonely place, too. There's little

opportunity to meet new people; one is so preoccupied with the show.

As a result, out-of-town is like a shipboard romance. Actors, like passengers, seem to lower their standards away from home. The only one on our ship of fools over whom I can generate any interest, though, is the actress playing my wife.

Her name is Linda Trenton, and she's alternately accomplished, attractive, argumentative and annoying.

But shucks, kids, this is show biz and we're out in the boondocks, and although I don't especially launch her into raptures of delirium, I'm still the only one around under fifty (staff, crew and local countrymen included!). And although she doesn't exactly quicken my pulse, she still happens to be the only one around not complaining about her last Medicare check.

So we sort of team up.

And here's the strange part. Real theatrical. Instead of using our correct names, we call each other the names of the characters we're playing.

My Paul to her Corie.

Granted, it's a little sick, but as Linda—that is, Corie—points out, at least we'll never make the mistake of being called by our wrongful names onstage.

Fair enough. But can I tell you how distracting it is when we're making love and at the height of orgasm she bites my ear and yells out, "Paul, Paul, PAUL, PAUL! PAUL!?"

Up North, in the Big Apple of Gotham, Chris is having the time of her life. I call the first week I'm away, and she reports in to be happy, busy and still very much in love. She calls the second week, reporting in as busy, still very much in love and miserable.

"What happened?" I ask.

"You won't believe it," she answers, wiping away a small tear.

"Come on. Tell."

"Well, that bastard. That bastard. Do you know what that bastard did?"

"What bastard?"



"Bradley, of course!"

"Oh, *that* bastard. Why didn't you say so?"

"I did!"

"Oh."

"That bastard told me last night that he's married. *Married*, for Christ's sake. Can you believe it?"

"Why didn't he tell you—"

"Sooner? Why? Because he's a bastard, that's why. Listen to this. His wife was away in Houston these past few weeks with her dying father. So he's been on the loose."

"Why'd he lie about her?"

"I'm coming to that. He tells me he wanted me so much he didn't want to scare me off; on our first date at the museum I told him how hurt I'd gotten by married men and wouldn't deal with them anymore. He said he wanted to show his true intentions before spilling the beans."

"What true intentions?"

"How should I know? His true intentions are that he hopes to keep me on as a quick ball whenever he can get away."

"Terrific," I say dryly.

"And on his schedule he probably means to hop over during cigarette breaks."

"The bastard."

"I'm so unhappy."

"I know, baby."

"What am I going to do?"

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him to get out of the house; what do you think I told him? The bastard. I reminded him I was not just an afternoon lay; *his own words!* So he left, I took five Valium, cried all night, called you and now I have to leave for rehearsal. With swollen eyes."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

"What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? I'm lonely and depressed. He's got me right where he wants. I love him, Steve. He knows it. I know it. I told him never to call again, that I wouldn't see him

unless he gets rid of his wife. Her or me. I'm tired of playing the Other Woman. I want top billing. He said he'll never call again, he understands. Now you and I both know he *will* call again, that I *will* see him. Am I right?"

"I'm afraid so," I mumble.

"What?" says Chris, wiping away another tear.

"I said you'll probably see him again."

"And what can that lead to?"

"The usual. Your being hurt."

"So why do I do it?"

"I don't know."

"Why do you think?"

"I don't know. Maybe . . . I guess. . . . Chris, it's not as if you've got a choice. You gotta do what you gotta do."

"Do you think I could ever be happy being happy?"

"Hard to say. Happiness is such a neurotic conception."

"His fucking wife came home for Christmas. Isn't that the lowest?"

"I'm sorry."

"And catch this. He says he and his wife have a terrific relationship. That's why when he cheats, he's always discreet. Waits for her to go off on one of her business trips or something. Doesn't want to see her hurt."

"And what about you?"

"What about me is right!"

"How's the revue going?"

"Slowly, but good. At least I can focus my energies there, take my mind off all this."

"Yeah."

"And Christmas at the end of the goddamn week. I've never been alone for Christmas. Spent the last five with you."

"Okay. Let's not get maudlin."

"I'll get maudlin if I want."

"All right, get maudlin. But if you'll just stay busy rehearsing and keep your chin up a little longer, I'll be home and we'll have the best late Christmas ever."

"Are you trying to cheer me up, Steve?"

"You make it sound like a subversive plot."

"I'm so unhappy."

"Chris, stop it. Once you've got the tree decorated you'll feel wonderful. You always do."

"There'll be no tree this year."

"Why the hell not?"

"I'm in mourning, that's why the hell not. Have you ever had a tree you couldn't share with someone? Now *that's* a sight to drive you to drink!"

"How are the dogs?"

"Well, all right, I guess. Ruth had another fit last night."

"Bad?"

"Not good. Three or four minutes."

"Has she been getting her pills?"

"Right on schedule."

"That should control it."

"Steven?"

"Yeah?"

"What am I going to do?"

"I don't know. Pray for a blizzard in Florida that'll shut down the rest of the tour and send me home to you."

"Wouldn't that be fabulous?"

"Fabulous."

"What are the odds?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I have to get off. I'll be late for rehearsal."

"That's my little trouper!"

"Please, Steve, I'll vomit."

"Not on long distance!"

"All the way to Palm Beach!"

"Okay. Try to maintain. I know it's rough, sweetheart. But think of your career. And me. *I* love you."

"That really is a comfort, you know."

"I know."

"Good-bye. Call me Christmas."

"Right. And, Chris . . . stay away from those fucking little pills."

"I will. I'm all right. Way past doing anything dumb like that again. Don't worry. Part of the joy of life has been learning to live with being unhappy most of the time."

"That's the spirit. Merry Christmas!"

"Bah. Humbug!"

I call Chris again on Christmas Eve early in the evening, before leaving for the theater.

No answer.

Performing a ten-year-old dated domestic comedy in a half-filled theater in Florida on a balmy evening is not my favorite way of passing Christmas Eve. But if, as a result, my performance this Yule is a little down, it's Tony Award material compared to the sluggish rendering Linda—that is, Corie—is passing off.

We can both be grateful there is no one in the house who knows any better, though. The response is as enthusiastic as ever. Senility has its place in theater!

After the performance, once makeup has been removed, Corie and I go out for a late dinner and then up to her room with a very inferior bottle of champagne.

Corie puts on the television, which is wise since it's not scintillating conversation that glues our relationship.

I call Chris again around one, but still no answer. I am now registering mild concern. Fairly drunk, Corie and I fall asleep somewhere in the middle of whichever version of *A Christmas Carol* is being screened on the tube.

The following morning, Christmas Day, around eleven, I finally get through to Chris.

"Hi!"

"Steve!"

"Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas to you, sweetheart."

"I've been calling."

"When?"

"All last night."

"I was out."

"Yeah?"

"A bunch of us went for drinks after rehearsal—"

"Oh."

"—and then I went home with Harold."

"Harold who?"

"Harold. You know Harold."

"No, I don't know Harold."

"Harold what's-his-name. . . . The kid in the company. . . . I told you about Harold. Dumb. Cute. Chubby. Strange."

I have no idea who she's talking about. "Oh, yes. *That* Harold!"

"Right!"

"How *is* Harold?"

"Dull."

"Oh?"

"Wants to be mothered."

"Not your scene."

"Not my scene. All I got was bed and bored."

"Why'd you do it?"

"What?"

"Go home with him?"

"Are you kidding? I'm glad I got someone as *decent* as him. The way I felt about returning to an empty apartment on Christmas Eve, without you, without Bradley, anyone not holding a gun to my forehead would have proved appealing."

"And?"

"And nothing. We went out for drinks. Everyone at the table had to run off someplace except cute-even-if-a-little-dumpy Harold. And I'd just downed my third vodka martini, so he was getting cuter and less dumpy by the ounce."

"And?"

"And so I was very coquettish and genteelly asked if he'd like to ball."

"And?"

"And he said it sounded like a good idea, despite the fact he doesn't like forward women, and then asked if it was okay to go back to his place and not mine because he had been so busy this morning before rehearsal he hadn't had time to feed his parakeet."

"So?"

"So we did."

"Did what?"

"Went to his apartment and fed his parakeet."



"And?"

"And what?"

"How was he?"

"Blue."

"I don't mean the parakeet, bird-brain, I mean Harold!"

"Oh, Harold! Right, I'd rather talk about the parakeet."

"Why?"

"More depth."

"Why?"

"Premature."

"Harold or the bird?"

"Harold. I don't know about the bird. I didn't make it with him. But Harold came all over his jockey shorts while we were getting undressed."

"No!"

"Yes. Hadn't laid a finger on me yet."

"I'm surprised he doesn't charge for that kind of stud service."

"We must know each other too well. That's exactly what I told Harold."

"Good girl. Then what happened?"

"Then we got into bed and watched *A Christmas Carol*."

"So did we."

"Small world."

"Which version?"

"I'm not sure. I started crying, and Harold got all upset."

"I don't think I like what's coming."

"Me neither. You know what happens when I start one of my uncontrollables. Pow! Harold thought I was freaking out."

"What'd he do?"

"He apologized profusely for coming too soon and promised he'd get it up again if only I'd stop crying. Seems he's got very thin walls and very thick neighbors."

"Then what?"

"The rest is pretty sloppy. Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"Shoot."

"Okay. Well, Harold stood on his knees on the bed,

whipped out his beef and started playing with himself, trying to get another erection."

"Nothing tops a class act. And?"

"And I started laughing hysterically."

"Then what?"

"Then Harold got an erection."

"And?"

"And I told him to go into the bathroom and masturbate because somehow, somewhere along the way, I'd lost the mood."

"And?"

"And Harold went into the bathroom and did himself."

"Then what?"

"Then I stopped laughing and started crying again because by this time Tiny Tim was going to lose his leg if Scrooge didn't come forth with some charity."

"Go on."

"Then Harold came out of the bathroom, exhausted. It had been quite an active evening for him. So we watched the rest of the movie and went to sleep."

"Nothing like a traditional Christmas Eve, huh?"

"Right." There's a short pause before Chris sheepishly asks, "Steve?"

"What?"

"What do you mean 'we'?"

"What do I mean 'we' what?"

"I told you we watched *A Christmas Carol* and you said, 'So did we.' "

"Did I? Aha." I toss off a short laugh. "Oh. Well, I meant me and Corie."

"You were with someone last night?"

"Yes."

"You had sex?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was going to. It was no big deal. I promise you, Chris, we both would have been better off with the parakeet."

"Or even each other."

"Or even each other."

"Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, darling."

The next time I speak with Chris is New Year's Day. It goes something like this:

"Hello?"

"Happy New Year, Chris!"

"Steve!"

"Right!"

"Happy New Year, darling!"

"How're things?"

"Wonderful!"

"Why?" I ask demurely, knowing very well why.

"Guess!"

"Guess?!"

"Yes."

"Okay. Um, someone called?"

"Yes."

"Someone you were happy to hear from?"

"Yes."

"Can I assume it wasn't someone holding a gun to your forehead?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Um, let's see . . . Bradley??"

"Yes!"

"Surprised?"

"Yes!"

"Happy?"

"Yes!"

"And miserable?"

"Yes."

"Both at the same time?"

"Yes."

"Did he want to see you?"

"Yes."

"Did you want to see him?"

"Yes."

"Did he ask you out?"

"Yes."

"Did you accept?"

"Yes."

"And then did you break it?"

"Yes."

"And then were you sorry?"

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"What do you mean, how'd I know? I know you, that's how I knew."

"Yes?"

"Of course. Once you accepted the date, Chris, which is what you really wanted to do, the side of you in constant battle with the rest of you made you see how you could only get hurt in this kind of setup, so you changed your mind."

"Yes!"

"Congratulations. I couldn't be more pleased. That was a healthy, logical move. Weren't you proud?"

"Yes!"

"And wasn't *that* a wonderful feeling?"

"Yes."

"Which lasted a very short time?"

"Yes."

"And was ultimately taken over by a good solid case of the yuckies?"

"Yes."

"And so you called him back and fixed the date you broke?"

"Yes."

"And so you saw him?"

"Yes."

"And had a fabulous time. One of the best."

"Yes."

"And then when he left, you got even more depressed than you were before he had arrived."

"Yes."

"And then you were sorry he ever came over in the first place."

"Yes."

"And vowed never to see him again."

"Yes."

"There's more?"  
"Yes."  
"He called again?"  
"Yes."  
"And you went through practically the same changes of minds?"  
"Yes."  
"But you ultimately gave in and let him come over."  
"Yes."  
"And now you love him more than ever."  
"Yes."  
"And are more miserable about it than ever?"  
"Yes."  
"Is that it? Have I got everything?"  
"Yes."  
"You know I'll be home in five days?"  
"Yes."  
"Well, Chris, sure's been nice talking to you."  
"Yes?"  
"Yes. Is there something else?"  
"Yes."  
"This is ridiculous. Do I have to guess?"  
"Yes."  
"All right. Are you going to see him again?"  
"Yes."  
"Soon?"  
"Yes."  
"Real soon."  
"Yes."  
"Tonight?"  
"Yes."  
"Sooner than tonight?"  
"Yes."  
"Now?"  
"Yes!"  
"He's lying next to you right now?"  
"YES!"  
"NOW I UNDERSTAND!"



## ACT TWO



## Chapter Eight

The theater: in actuality a converted loft. The seats: badly aged, badly peeling, badly recushioned pews donated by a local church. The houselights: carefully dimmed to hide the dirt on the floors and walls, but at the same time, making it difficult to see where one is walking.

The one hundred and fifty or so invited guests find it too dark to read the small program that's been provided, so they chat quietly among themselves. There's no small amount of tension, some excitement and even a little hope in the air.

Eventually, the houselights dim, and the audience, not knowing what's to come, enjoys the mystery of the moment, releasing a buzz of enthusiasm which electrifies the entire house. This mutual charge is felt as everyone braces, knowing the play's about to begin, hoping the fickle, uncertain magic of theater might strike here tonight . . . for that rare change.

After a few moments, the stagelights come up: ambers, blues, pinks—gels all. The sound of a roaring, rattling subway is heard from the speaker next to the stage.

The piano player plinks out a soft child's nursery rhyme, and the voices of small children eventually fill the stage.

*Another Straw*, Chris' revue, has begun.

It is the fifth of January. I've just flown in from Florida not forty-five minutes ago. No time to drop off my luggage or pick up the dogs, I race as soon as I get off the plane at

Kennedy into a taxi, down to the Village, arriving just before the show starts.

My only disappointment upon getting here with but moments to spare is the dark lighting which doesn't allow me to show off my tan.

But back to the show.

Dressed as children, the eight performers come onstage singing a song about living in Manhattan either as very wealthy, superbright kids or as very poor, underexposed children of the inner-city ghetto.

It's a good number, well sung with clever choreography and some genuinely comic moments.

The audience is most responsive when the number ends, thumping, whistling, hooting, cheering, and it doesn't take long to realize the producers have stuffed the house only with friends, relatives, well-wishers and investors.

The show goes on and gets better. Chris has a terrific song all her own about the trouble she always gets into whenever she doesn't have the exact bus fare.

There are skits and musical numbers about the tall buildings, the short mayor, the graffiti in the subways, the cheap pickup bars and the expensive gourmet restaurants.

Some of it is quite good. Some not so good. All, however, is received with equal enthusiasm by this audience most anxious to appreciate what's being offered. The entire revue seems promising enough, though there's plenty to be done before it solidifies.

But that's what this early presentation in this drafty loft is all about. The producer is trying to raise funds to bring the show to an uptown house. So he offers this early rendering with promise that uptown will be the more polished version of what is being seen here tonight.

The show ends on a saccharinely high note of optimism about how people of all persuasions and colors are going to get together to make this city a better place in which to live. Pleading for patriotism and humanity in the eleventh hour, while a bit banal for my jaded tastes, brings this hyped audience to its feet, cheering praises wildly and lauding bravos upon the curtain calls as though these frenzied peo-

ple had just sat through the opening-night performance of *My Fair Lady*.

Since everyone else is on his feet clamoring for more, I stand up, too, and applaud madly with them.

After three curtain calls, the last one truly milked by the stage manager, who brings the lights up and down, the dimmed houselights come up again, and the audience starts to file out.

A few minutes later, it's quite crowded "backstage"—that is, at the rear of the loft. The same friends, relatives and well-wishers that earlier constituted the audience now flood these four tiny dressing rooms with kisses, compliments and congratulations.

Shoving my way to Chris' shared dressing room with my luggage, fighting to get past one hundred and fifty people, is quite an interesting experience. I had no idea I could get so many theatergoers irked and teed off simply by crashing into them with a heavy suitcase.

But no matter. For as soon as Chris sees me, she stops talking to someone and runs over, jumping into my arms. I drop my weighted luggage with a thud and embrace her back.

"Steve! You made it!"

"Barely. The plane was two hours late."

"You're so tan!"

"Chris, you were terrific!"

"Really?"

"Really!"

"Was it okay?"

"Better. It was fine. You were wonderful."

She jumps up and hugs me again. Really tight.

"I missed you so much," she says excitedly, squeezing me still tighter. I take one look down into those dark dark-green eyes, and there it goes again, that jolt which won't leave my privates alone. The surge goes right through me. I smile at Chris, and she smiles back, that all-too-knowing sign, letting me know she's got the same juice jetting through her as well.

So here we stand, surrounded by no less than fifty people



in this unbelievably crowded hallway . . . arousing each other.

"Chris . . ." I whisper.

"What?" she whispers back in my ear, at the same time taking a small nibble of my lobe.

"I'm-getting-excited," I singsong to her.

She singsongs back to me, "What-would-you-like-me-to-do-about-it?"

"I'd-like-you-to-take-your-thigh-away-from-my-crotch."

Chris looks down at her thigh as though she'd just met it for the first time and says in wonderment, "Now how do you suppose that got there?"

"Beats me."

"Come here." Chris steps back, grabs my hand, leading me through these throngs to her dressing room. "There's someone I'd like you to meet." Using my luggage as a battering wedge, we push our way into Chris' dressing room, and she leads me to a corner, to some guy standing there and, pointing to him, says, "*This is Bradley!*"

Which takes me totally by surprise. Unprepared, this comes as a shot from nowhere, and I'm temporarily thrown.

"How do you do?" says Bradley, extending a very firm hand.

"Um . . . Fine, thank you." I start snapping out of it. "How do *you* do?"

"Very well, thank you," says Bradley, very much in control.

"Bradley, this is Steven Butler."

We exchange another round of "Hi!" and then, feeling somehow awkward for reasons I cannot explain, I turn to Chris, hoping she'll pick up the ball from here.

Chris senses the awkwardness Bradley and I are experiencing and of course revels in it. Turning away from us and sitting down at the lighted mirror to remove her makeup, she casually says, "You fellows chat a bit while I get ready." Spoken like the quintessential vamp.

So here I am, face to face with Chris' Mr. Wonderful.

And I've got to hand it to him. The guy is cute.

The curly blond hair, the twisted smile, the laughing eyes, the craggy face, the assertive manner. It all works.

I hate him.

"Where you been?" he asks, pointing to my tan.

"Hmmm?" I ask innocently.

"The tan." He points to my face again.

"Oh, that!" I touch my face as though I'd forgotten the tan was there. "Oh"—I casually shrug—"just spent the weekend with friends in Tahiti."

"Don't be a smart-ass, Steven," scolds Chris from the makeup table.

"Just got back from Florida," I say in more of an apologetic tone than I would have preferred.

"Really?" old blond curls responds. "Anywhere near Palm Beach?"

"Yes. Right in Palm Beach."

"How funny. I recently spoke with friends there. Apparently it's been a ghastly season."

"Oh?"

"No one is down there."

"Could've fooled me."

"Didn't you notice the difference?"

"I have no point of comparison. It was my first time."

"I see," says Bradley, almost disappointed.

"Yeah. I was working there."

"Working?" Bradley asks, puzzled, as though everyone knows the only thing to do in Palm Beach is play.

"Yes. Working in a show."

Bradley's face lights up with relief. "I see!" he says, releasing a short, casual laugh. "You show people are really something else."

"Just what do you mean?" I ask, remaining calm, yet letting him in on the edge of hostility in my voice. Jesus, who'd have guessed we'd ever hit it off so well? Chris, no dummy, picks up the growing animosities and hurries to get out of her stage makeup and into a cute pants outfit. "I'm ready!" she announces, after a very few minutes, looking radiant.

I lock my luggage in Chris' dressing room, and the three

of us walk all the way over to the West Village, to the producer's apartment, for the opening-night party.

The aroma of marijuana is so thick as we enter this huge, darkly lit, jammed room I'm sure we'll all get an immediate contact high. Two friends of the producer are sitting at a table in a corner rolling joints, assembly-line fashion, as if it were a Havana cigar factory.

There are four speakers around the room, a quad system blaring out the latest black sound. Those couples who can find room are dancing; others are finding air to breathe.

Chris, Bradley and I share a joint, and soon know the producer is a host with expensive tastes.

"Colombian!" says one of the stoned holy rollers at the table, beaming with pride. "Mixed with a little angel dust!"

Angel dust, for those of you out of touch with the drug culture, is a cute little something conjured up by a San Francisco teen-age druggist-genius who found that the right combination of mint leaves dipped in formaldehyde will get you very stoned at the modest price of the destruction of several hundred brain cells and the temporary relinquishing of reality.

But far be it from me to stop the carnival. Hell, everyone's makin' whoopee and smokin' the dust and drinkin' the booze and dancin' the boogie and a guy in one corner is passing out Quaaludes to his friends and a couple in another corner are making out on a couch and a threesome in a third corner are sniffing cocaine and a foursome on the dance floor are stuffing poppers up their noses and does anyone remember when opening-night parties meant going to Sardi's and having a couple of drinks while waiting for reviews?

Chris and Bradley squeeze their way through the people maze to the dance area, where they let loose.

I take a walk around the apartment and stop when someone behind me giggles "Hello!"

Turning, I find Wendy Chartoff, the girl I'd taken for coffee after the Sure audition.

"Hi!" I answer back excitedly, and we both hug and kiss

one another affectionately like old lost friends. Drugs certainly make it easier for people to get familiar fast.

"What are you doing here?" she asks.

"Getting stoned. What else?"

"No. I mean who do you know?"

"Chris Canaday is a friend of mine. She's in the show."

"I know. She's very good. . . . I'm a friend of Marty Silvers, the producer."

"Where is he?"

"He's not here. Hates parties. He's at some bar waiting to see what the papers say."

"What do you think?"

"I think it doesn't matter. If the papers like it, he'll have no trouble raising the money to bring it uptown. If they hate it, it doesn't matter because he's so rich he'll pay to transfer it uptown himself."

"That's good," I say enthusiastically.

"Yeah. I think they've got a lot of good material."

"Me too. How come you didn't try out for it?"

"I was in Cleveland this past month doing *Summer and Smoke*."

"Heavy!"

"Yeah. Heh-heh. Hey, is that a tan you're wearing or the lighting in here?"

"Both."

"Ahahahahahaha."

"I see you haven't lost your sense of humor."

"Are you kidding? I'm so stoned I'd laugh at a serious traffic accident."

"Good for you. Want to dance?"

"If you can get us there."

Wendy and I manage to hack our way to the dance floor where we cut the rug a spell. After that we find a small available couch and collapse. We remain fixed there, chatting and smoking a little over an hour, and watch as the party gets more crowded and less lively. I long ago lost sight of Chris and Bradley and don't even know whether or not they're still here.

"Look." I finally throw in the towel. "I can only take so much partying at this level. I think we've peaked."

"I agree."

"Want to leave?"

"Sure."

Stumbling through the crowd again, we search for our coats on the banister outside the apartment and leave.

After retrieving my luggage at the theater, Wendy and I head uptown to Chris' apartment, where we pick up the dogs. Chris and I each have a spare key to the other's place for situations like these.

Harry and Ruth spend five very frenetic minutes greeting me with yips and jumps. I gather their leashes, and Wendy and I take them home to my apartment, where she agrees to spend the night.

We have a really good time, too. A little odd, perhaps, in that she giggles and laughs whenever aroused, but I'm stoned enough to laugh along with her. I even pick up a little tip: Bursting into laughter just prior to orgasm is the best thing I've found for prolonging ejaculation.

Much later on, we're fast asleep when the phone rings.

"Chris?" I answer groggily.

"Of course it's Chris! Who'd you expect, Eleanor Roosevelt?"

"What is it?"

"Where the hell are you?" she shouts vigorously.

"Sssssh!" I whisper.

"Whadda ya mean, Sssssh?"

"I mean Ssssssh. There's someone sleeping next to me."

"Ruth?"

"Besides Ruth."

"Harry?"

"Besides Harry."

"Sounds awfully crowded."

"It is."

"Who is it?"

"Wendy," I whisper.

"WENDY WHO?" Chris shouts.

"Let's not go through that again."



"Why did you leave without saying good-bye?"

"I looked all over for you. Figured you'd left."

"We didn't leave. In fact, we just got home."

I look over at my digital. "Chris," I whisper, trying to remain calm through my mounting impatience, "it's five thirty in the morning. Why are you calling me?"

"Just thought you'd like to join us for breakfast, that's all."

"Breakfast at five thirty in the morning!?"

"Are you coming over or not? I have to know how big an omelet to make."

"Make a small one. Count me out."

"Why?"

"Are you crazy? How can you possibly ask me why? I can't just jump out of bed and run over there. What am I supposed to do with Wendy?"

"Wendy *who*?"

"Chris?"

"Yes?"

"Do you mind if we talk about this tomorrow?"

"It is tomorrow."

"Then later on tomorrow."

"You know, Steve, I remember when you used to be fun."

"Me too. Hey, how were the reviews?"

"Mixed to good. Marty came in with the papers about three this morning. They liked the music and thought the cast was talented, but knocked some of the skits. Marty said they weren't money reviews but quotable enough to get us uptown."

"Good. Congratulations."

"Thanks. Sure you won't change your mind about breakfast?"

"No chance."

"Okay, party pooper, see if you get invited to another of my notorious celebrity soirees!"

"God, I hope that's a promise!"

"Good morning!"

"Good night!"



The following morning Wendy rises at eight, downs a quick cup of black coffee and sets out for a nine o'clock commercial call.

I leash up my brace of bulldogs and stroll through a light drizzle to Zabar's. There I pick up an ounce of fresh caviar (seven dollars and fifty cents for God's sake! But then Chris doesn't open in a new play every night). The dogs and I walk over to Chris' apartment on West Eighty-fifth Street, arriving a little before nine.

Revenge at last!

I ring the bell and wait several minutes until finally Chris wearily inquires, "Who is it?"

"The Cropsey Maniac!"

The door opens, and a very bleary-eyed young lady bearing a faint resemblance to Chris stands there in wrinkled flowered bathrobe and disheveled hair.

"Everybody up, UP, *UP!*" I pronounce, gleefully walking past her, into the kitchen.

"Is this supposed to be funny?" says Chris, more bitterly than I'd have thought possible.

"Come on, Chris, another day has dawned. Time to rise and shine. I was up and wanted to talk, so I came right over because I knew you'd understand. After all," I add, imitating her, "what are good friends for?"

"My teeth are numb."

"Too much cocaine? You must learn to go slow with the great white tooth powder."

"I didn't have any cocaine. My teeth are numb because I haven't had any sleep."

"Then let's get out the Geritol and give this girl a boost. Look, I brought breakfast. . . . Caviar!" I exclaim, whipping out the tiny tin.

"How cosmopolitan." Chris yawns. "I just finished breakfast."

"Oh, right. Well, sit down and watch *me* eat."

"No."

"Yes."

"No. I've got to get back to Bradley."

"Where?"

"Still sleeping, if he's lucky, in the bedroom."

"I see. By the by, Ms. Canaday, can I ask you a small question?"

"Shoot."

"What happened?"

"When?"

"Last time we spoke openly, you were all upset because he was a married man and it was all over unless he got rid of his wife."

"That's right."

"What happened?"

"He got rid of his wife."

"What?"

"Do you remember my telling you she was in Houston with her dying father and that's why he was able to see so much of me?"

"I do."

"Well, he died."

"Her father?"

"Right. So she returned to Houston, and Bradley returned to me."

"For how long?"

"Who knows?"

"What does that mean?"

"It means his wife returns tonight but also that Bradley has been saying some pretty heavy things to me lately about us, if you know what I mean."

"No. I don't."

"Don't be thick, Steve."

"I'm not trying to be."

"You know. Things about how much he likes me and what fun we've had and wouldn't it be nice if we could spend all our time together. Things like that."

"I see."

"I think I'm going to adore Minnesota."

"I wouldn't buy my plane ticket yet."

"Oh, Steve, you're such a cynic!"

"It's just you shouldn't count your chickens before they hatch!"

"Oh, yeah?" retorts Chris, sticking out her tongue. "Well, it just so happens that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush!"

"Well, for your information, you're putting the cart before the horse!"

"Then I'll cross that bridge when I come to it!"

"But don't burn your bridges behind you!"

"Or put off for tomorrow what I can do today!"

"Today is yesterday tomorrow!"

"Steve, that's ridiculous!"

"All right. How 'bout: 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder?'"

"Not bad. How 'bout: 'Out of sight, out of mind?'"

"How 'bout feeding me?"

"How 'bout feeding yourself?"

"I'm starving!"

"You know, I've worked up another appetite myself."

"Good. Let's eat."

Which is what we do.

Chris brews a large pot of coffee. We eat and drink and devour the caviar and laugh and carry on, having a wonderful time until Bradley, wakened by our racket, comes out from the bedroom draped in, are you ready for this, a Bloomingdale's bedsheet.

"What's all the noise?" he asks with conviction.

"We've been waiting for you," I tell him. "The *Julius Caesar* dress rehearsal is just about to begin in the kitchen."

Bradley looks at me, slightly confused, twirling a lock of his sickeningly thick blond hair between his fingers.

"Don't mind Steve, Bradley . . . he's all show biz."

"Et tu, Brute?" I ask of Chris rather theatrically.

"See what I mean?" Chris tells Bradley.

Bradley joins the party, which isn't nearly as much fun as before, but maybe laughs and good times aren't everything.

Bradley and Chris are cooing and mooning over each other so intensely I'm soon bored. They amuse themselves while I stare at my knee.

In fact, I'm soon bored enough to make my apologies, stating I must be on my way.

Which strikes neither of them as a terribly bad idea. So I leash up the beasts, exchange insincere farewells with Bradley, and leave.

The phone is ringing when I walk into my apartment.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Heh-heh-heh-heheh-heh-heh."

"Oh, it's you. Hi, Wendy."

"Funniest thing. You know my white and gold compact case with the picture of Josephine and Napoleon on it?"

"No."

"Well, I left it on your bathroom sink."

"That's too bad. What should I do with it?"

"Well, no sense keeping it. It's not even your shade. Heheheh-heh-heh. I think I should pick it up."

"Fine. Why don't you do that?"

"All right. Will you be home this afternoon around four?"

"I think so."

"Great. I'll drop by then. Toodles!"

"Bye."

She left her compact here? Am I expected to believe that old ruse? Sure, why not? Happens all the time. Especially to people who need an excuse to return to the scene of the crime. Good. If she's heading back, that must mean she enjoyed what we did and is coming home for more. A reprise. Encore. Bravo! Ah, Old Don Juan Butler, how do you do it?

The Midas touch strikes once more!

But the big question, of course, is: Do I want to see her again? Well, I think about that a bit weighing good sex on her plus side, an annoying laugh on her negative, and find that good sex wins out. Wendy, I'll be waiting.

At four o'clock on the button, Wendy rings the bell. "Ding-dong. Avon calling!" she announces upon entering the apartment.

"That's very cute," I tell her.

She continues with the bit. "Hello, sir. We hope you

received the experimental compact we sent you by mail?" Her voice is quavering a bit, telling me she's somewhat nervous. Love it.

"I beg your pardon?" I say, unamused, like I don't get the joke, knowing she'll have to work harder.

"The ultimate in revolutionary makeup," she says, forcing a smile.

I decide to catch on. "Oh, yes. *That* compact. Right. It's sitting on the bathroom sink, ready to be claimed."

"So good of you to have held on to it for us."

"Anything for Avon."

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh."

Wendy goes to the bathroom and returns, tossing her compact up and down in the air like a large coin.

"You found it," I say, moving over to her. "You know the girl who left it here was quite attractive."

"Oh?" asks Wendy, pleased.

"That's right. Spent last night with me, in fact."

"No?" says Wendy, mock horror.

"True. And dynamite in bed, too."

"Really?" asks Wendy, innocent eyelashes batting.

"God's truth. Kind of sex you can never get enough of."

"Ooooooh!" giggles Wendy with a shiver. I can tell by the glazed look across her eyes that the courtship is over. She's mine.

Taking her hand, I lead her into the bedroom. "This is the room where it all took place."

"How fascinating," says Wendy, trying to pull her hand away from mine, ever so slightly, letting me know I can have her but she'd appreciate it if I'd work on the seduction part just a bit longer before tossing her on the mattress. Which is fair, I guess. . . . We all have our levels of pride.

"Yes. Right here in this very room," I continue. "Of course, it was much darker last evening. Let me show you." Going over to the window, I lower the shade. Then I trot to the stereo and drop on Mahler's Fifth. Always a good bet.

As I light a candle on the table next to the bed, Wendy shrugs and says, "Hey, come on. You don't have to



demonstrate any further. Really. I get the idea. I only came by for my compact."

"Don't say another word," I tell her firmly, placing a finger across the middle of her lips. Then, drawing her close, I place my arms around her and bring my lips down to meet hers. Moving in for the kill is how I think they refer to it at stag parties.

Several hours later Wendy and I are standing at the door, saying good-bye.

"I'm glad you forgot your compact. Thanks for coming back," I say on cue.

"It was fun."

"Let's get together soon," I say, hopefully halfheartedly enough so she'll know I don't mean it.

"Love to," she says with enthusiasm, calling my bluff.

"I'll call."

"Do you have my number, Steve?"

"Why don't you write it down?" I'm beginning to think she's better at this game than me.

Wendy writes down her number and handing it to me, pulls the *coup de grâce*. "I'm so rarely home, you'll probably never be able to reach me. So if I don't hear from you in the next few days, I'll call."

"Perfect!" I tell her, wondering just how she managed to sneak in that extra point.

A long farewell, and she is gone.

Later that afternoon I learn of two commercial calls I've got for tomorrow.

My first audition is at nine thirty in the morning, so planning to be fresh and on top of things, I decide to get a good night's rest. I'm quite beat from yesterday's winging from Fla. to Gotham and the commotion of Chris' opening night festivities, coupled with last night's and this afternoon's sexual intramural activities.

It's now pouring outside, a fine evening to sleep. So I take a Seconal and am gone by ten thirty.



At eleven the phone rings.

"What did I do to deserve this?" is my weary greeting.

"Did I wake you?" asks Chris with uncanny innocence.

"No. I'm just imitating a sleeping person."

"It's a very good impersonation."

"Thanks."

"You weren't really asleep, were you? It's only eleven."

"I checked out at ten thirty."

"You're not feeling well?"

"I feel fine. Got an early audition in the morning and wanted to be good and rested."

"Ridiculous! You'll be overprepared. Get up, get dressed and come meet me."

"Out of the question."

"Why?" asks Chris, very insistent.

"*Because!*" is my defensive reply.

"Why 'because'?" is Chris' counterdefensive.

"This is getting us nowhere. How was the show tonight?"

"The usual second night letdown. Audience liked it, though."

"Good."

"I've had two vodka martinis, Steve, am getting very sloshed and am very upset. I've got to see you."

"My heart says yes; my legs refuse."

"That's no reason."

"Well, it'll just have to do."

"Please, Steve. It's very important. I've got to speak with you."

"Okay. Speak."

"Not on the phone."

"Why not on the phone?"

"Come on, Steve. I'm upset."

"What else is new?"

"STEVE!"

"All right. Tell you what. Come over here, and I promise I'll be so attentive you won't even notice my snoring."

"Steve, I'm serious!"

"So am I."

"I don't want to go to your place. I want to be in a bar."

"Where *are* you anyway?"

"Casey's."

"In the Village?"

"Yes."

"You expect me to travel all the way to the Village??"

"It's only a hop, skip and a jump by subway."

"Chris, I'm not capable of skipping into my living room."

"Tell you what . . . I'll compromise and come uptown."

"You're too good."

"It's the least I can do since you're leaving a warm bed to meet me."

"I am not leaving a warm bed to meet you."

"But you must. Didn't we just compromise?"

"We didn't. You did."

"Let's not argue. The important thing is we're getting together, right?"

"Wrong! We are not getting together."

"Since I'm sacrificing and coming uptown to you, I may as well pick the place."

"Don't pick anything, Chris. I am not meeting you. I am going back to sleep."

"I've got it! O'Neal's! That's right around the corner from you."

"I don't care."

"What could be easier?"

"Ending this conversation."

"STEVE!"

"Chris, don't do this to me!"

"Half an hour, no?"

"NO!"

"Tell you something else: You're such a good boy, I'm buying the drinks."

"Don't bother."

"No bother. It's on me."

"Keep your money, sport. I am not leaving this house. I am going back to sleep!"

"I feel a hundred percent better already."

"I promise you, Chris; not this time!"

"I'm heading uptown right now."

"I'M NOT GOING!"

"If you're a little late, I'll start without you."

"Chris . . . listen to me—"

"I'll get us a booth. Nice and comfy."

"Chris—"

"Nothing's too good for my angel."

"CHRIS!"

"Half an hour, Stevie-poo. Love. Love. Love!"

"Chris, it's not going to work. I'm not—"

Click.

Thirty minutes later I find Chris hunched over an almost empty vodka martini in the middle of a booth in the back room of O'Neal's. "All right," I ask impatiently. "Now just what exactly is the big news that brings me out at this very late, very wet hour?"

Chris looks up at me.

Not a happy face.

"Thanks for coming," she says quietly. "Sit down."

I sit down.

An unemployed actor/working waiter comes over to take our order.

"I'll have a scotch and water," I tell him. "Chris?"

Chris looks up. "I'll have a vodka and death."

As the waiter stares at her dumbfoundedly, I ask, "Would you settle for another vodka martini?"

"Only if it's a lethal dose!"

"Bring her another, please," I tell the waiter. He leaves and I turn my attentions to Chris. "Okay, kiddo. Shoot!"

"This is not going to be pleasant, Steve."

"All right."

"Where should I begin?"

"How should I know? I don't even know what's upset you."

"You *must* know."

"Bradley?"

"Of course. Who else could make me this unhappy?"

"Tell me what happened."

"Well, once you left, we had a really nice time."

"Thanks a lot."

"You know what I mean. Bradley relaxed and became affectionate and oh, forget it, I don't feel like talking about it anymore."

**"ARE YOU CRAZY?" I roar. "I JUST DRAGGED MYSELF OVER HERE IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS DISGUSTING NIGHT INSTEAD OF STAYING HOME GETTING SOME BEAUTY REST, LIKE A SENSIBLE PERSON, SO BELIEVE ME YOU'RE GOING TO TELL ME WHATEVER IT IS YOU'RE GOING TO TELL ME AND I MEAN RIGHT NOW OR I'LL GIVE YOU SUCH A FAT LIP, YOU'LL REALLY HAVE SOMETHING TO BE DEPRESSED ABOUT!"**

Chris looks at me a bit startled. When she is finally able to speak, she says, "I get such a sexual rush whenever you yell at me."

"Don't try to apologize!" I snap back.

"All right. Calm down."

*"Don't tell me to calm down!"*

"Do you want to hear what happened, or not?"

"NO, damn it! I want to give you another sexual rush."

"No deal. It doesn't work if you force it."

Shot down, I relax, pausing briefly to catch my breath, while the waiter delivers our drinks. "All right, Chris. Let's hear it."

"Well, it's like this . . . Bradley and I went back into the bedroom after you left and had a really nice time. One of our best sessions ever."

"Congratulations."

"Don't interrupt. Afterward he held me for a long time and told me how much he was going to miss me."

"But—"

"I said don't interrupt. He said that the time we'd spent together was very precious to him and he would love to get together again as soon as he can get away or next time his wife leaves town."

"I think I know what's coming."

"I asked him why he'd dropped all those hints about leaving his wife, and he said it was all in my head. That he'd meant nothing by them but passing compliments. You see, Steve, you were right. I was jumping the gun . . . as always."

"I'd rather've been wrong, believe me."

"I know. Don't apologize for my dunder moves. You want to hear the best part? Seems he lied to me about all his family money. He comes from some shitty section of Jersey, never had a nickel. *She's* the one with the assets. Putting him through medical school, too. So he can't leave her now even if he wanted."

"What did you tell him?"

"The usual. That I expected more from a relationship than just being an afternoon ball and then asked him to leave."

"And?"

"And he left."

"And?"

"And that's it."

"Oh." There is a long pause. Chris and I each take a few sips of our drinks. "Not exactly Happily Ever After, huh?" I suggest.

"Not exactly," she quietly agrees, slipping right in front of me into some deep, troubled thought. She doesn't say anything, but I can feel the wheels turning. Her hands meld slowly into clenched fists, and I can practically see the fury rising from within her. "God damn it!" she finally explodes, pounding the table with her fists. "It's my father all over again. Nothing ever changes."

"I don't understand."

Tears are mounting in Chris' eyes as she dismisses me with a wave of her hand. "Forget it," she tells me. "It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. It matters a great deal. What the hell is bothering you?"

"It's a long story."

"As luck would have it, Chris, I just happen to be in the mood for a long story."

"No. I've never told anyone."



"I don't care. Wipe your eyes and tell me what you're talking about. I'm not leaving here until you do!"

"It won't interest you."

"Chris!" I raise my voice. "NOW!"

"All right, damn it. Don't yell."

"What is it?"

"It's . . . well, it happened a long time ago."

"Go on."

"I was I think seven at the time. My parents were always fighting, mostly about his supposed philandering about. So they decided we should all take a vacation together. Sort of one last attempt to postpone further the fact they'd each made a mistake. You with me so far?"

"So far."

"Good. So we took a house at Cannon Beach down in Oregon for a week, which we couldn't afford, but money was no object since they were trying to salvage their marriage, right?"

"All right."

"I was crazy about my father. Just crazy about him. Though I rarely saw him. He was away so much of the time, on the road, and when he was home, most of what I remember involves he and my mother fighting. Pretty?"

"Go on."

"Well, there we were in the vacationland of Cannon Beach, stuck in the house one bright and sunny afternoon, while my folks were really going at it. One of their bigger blowouts.

"Well, I was sitting around with my pail and shovel, impatiently waiting for us all to go out and play. But we didn't go anywhere. They were so deeply entrenched in their fight, hollering back and forth at each other as they were, the petty needs of a sniveling kid took a fast backseat."

"So you just sat there and watched all this?"

"It wasn't unique. They always fought in front of me. For years I just assumed all married people were like that. But this day they were yelling and carrying on with a greater intensity and far more anger than usual. Which frightened and upset me, I guess."

"Understandably."

"So I finally told them, late in the afternoon, that I was going out to watch the sunset and would they please come and get me when they were finished arguing?"

"And they said?"

"And they said, fine, do whatever you want. So I left the house and happily skipped to the edge of the beach, where I sat and watched the waves coming in."

"And?"

"And what I didn't know was that this fight was their last biggie. The final backbreaker. As they fought, my father packed his bags and, in a peak of rage, walked out."

"Walked out?"

"Walked out. Left. Good-bye, thanks for a shitty ten years, have a good life."

"What'd your mother do?"

"Well, as you can imagine, she was a bit bereft. She ran into the bedroom, downed a couple of tranquilizers and then cried herself to sleep."

"And what about you?"

"Right. Meanwhile, back at the beach, sits young naïve Chris, waiting patiently, daydreaming as the sun sets, fantasizing how her parents are gonna show up any moment now, arm in arm in joyous reconciliation before hugging and kissing me, all of us jumping about in oodles of love squeezes and expressions of affection.

"But you know what, Steve? That dumb little girl sat on that beach and watched the day end all by herself. And as the sun went down, this scary dark fog rolled in from nowhere, chilling me terribly. But I didn't budge. After all, my parents were coming to get me. Eventually I suppose I realized my daydream was not only not about to come true, but had suddenly turned into this incredible nightmare.

"Sitting there in that dark fog, I soon felt the most appalling sense of imminent terror. It frightened me like nothing before, and I began to shake like crazy. And this fear kept growing and building until it became the most outrageous desperation circling the pit of my stomach. It

got me so upset and hysterical I actually grew nauseous and soon vomited.

"So there sits this dumb kid on the beach in the dark, teary-eyed, shivering, vomit-stained, too scared out of her mind to stay where she is but also too terrified to run through the foggy blackness, back to the safety of her father's open arms and all that warmth and security.

"So she sits there and waits, growing sicker and more hysterical by the minute.

"Oh, my mother finally woke up several hours later and, worried out of her head, came looking for me with a flashlight. We had a traumatizing teary reunion, highlighted by her explaining to me what a bastard my father was and what he had done."

"And what happened?"

"To my father? Who knows? We never really heard from him again. Except once. About six months after that I received a postcard from Los Angeles. It had a picture of the Farmer's Market on the front and the message on the back said, 'Dear Chris, Please understand. Love, Daddy.' Please understand what, for Christ's sake?! He had always been so kind to me, Steve. And he was so handsome. Such a big, strapping man. I hardly knew him, but I was mad for him. Always expected to see him again. To hear from him. To run into him. Something. But I don't even know if he's still alive." Chris lowers her eyes sadly for a few moments while neither of us says anything. Then she lifts them again and, looking straight at me, says quite softly, "He didn't even have the decency to come to me and say good-bye."

I extend my hand to her arm and squeeze it affectionately. "I'm sorry, baby."

Chris snaps out of it, twisting her arm free. "Sorry? Don't be sorry. What's there to be sorry about? He walked out. Big deal. It happened a long, long time ago. I'm way over it. It's just . . . well. . . ."

"Yes?"

"It's just that at times like these, when things start falling apart, that dreaded feeling I got on the beach returns to

haunt me. And no matter what I do, I just can't shake it. I'm so goddamned confused. And you know what I'd really like to understand? I'd love to know why it is every time I see myself getting kicked in the teeth, each time I see it coming, I rush forward practically begging to be clobbered."

"I don't know, Chris. . . . But if it'll make you feel any better, I'm glad I came out to meet you."

Chris leans forward in the booth, putting her hand on top of mine. "You know," she says softly, wiping a tear away with her free hand, trying to summon the slightest smile, "you're the only one I can count on. You're all I have."

"That's fair," I answer, in absolute sincerity, caressing her cheek with my free hand. "You're all I want."

## Chapter Nine

"I've got a plan!" announces Chris with glee, as I answer her call the following afternoon.

"A plan?" I cautiously question into the receiver.

"Guaranteed to improve matters considerably."

"Oh, yeah? Well, I know that maniacal tone in your voice. Lucille Ball conniving Vivian Vance. Count me out!"

"Nonsense. It's a terrific idea. Tonight, after the show, I'll pick you up and we'll go to the Blue Owl and drink and laugh and be *exceedingly* attentive to each other."

"To what end?"

"To what end do you think, dummy? To make Bradley jealous, of course."

"It ain't gonna work. He knows we're just friends."

"Of course it'll work."

"Don't you think it's a little obvious?"

"Why? It's a bar in your neighborhood. We just happened to be passing and thought we'd stop in for one or two. What could be more natural?"

"Not going."

"Come on, Steve. I miss him so. What've we got to show by not going?"

"Infinite good taste!"

"Are you kidding? We could have a glorious time sitting at the bar, getting sloshed."

"When did you get so jaded? When we first met, you thought *The Sound of Music* was racy."

"That was a long time ago."



"I guess."

"Come on, Steve. I know my men."

"Wrong!"

"I'll buy!"

"Chris, you promised to buy the drinks last night!"

"And what happened?"

"What do you think happened? While you were in the ladies' room, washing your eyes, I paid the check."

"I was wondering why they didn't stop us when we left."

"I take it back. You're not jaded."

"That's more like it. I'll pick you up at ten thirty."

"I'll be ready."

Click.

One of these days, Chris . . . one of these days . . . I swear—I'm going to finally say NO!

I hope.

The Blue Owl is very West Side, if you know what I mean. Homey, books on shelves, a fireplace in the back. The carved old wooden bar is overly long and overly crowded when we arrive.

No trouble for Chris, though, who elbows and karate-chops her way through the three-deep throng, finally angling a teeny spot for both of us lodged between two huge, hostile, heavily loaded drinkers.

Bradley, down at one end, seems to be working hard, filling one order after another.

When he passes us, his head turns in recognition, and his mouth almost falls to his chin. He checks himself quickly though, and smiles a greeting backed with the sincerity of a politician.

"By the by," Chris quietly announces, jabbing an elbow into my ribs, "there is some good news."

"That's a novelty these days."

"For sure. Marty told the cast last night he thinks we'll be moving uptown pretty soon. Maybe next month."

"Terrific!"

"Yeah. He's meeting with the people at the Plaza. We may go in there as one of their *Plaza 9* presentations."

"That'd be great exposure."

"Don't I know! I just wish I were as fat romantically as I am professionally."

"You will be. Just relax."

"Relaxation is the one thing for which I have no time. Let's get to work!" Chris smiles seductively, focusing her attentions toward the bartender.

Bradley finishes mixing some awful green-creamy drink, serves it and walks over to us. Chris places a cigarette in the middle of her mouth and rasp-throatedly asks, "Pardon me, bartender, have you got a match?"

He smiles, wipes his hands on a towel, picks up a book of matches, strikes a flame and lights her cigarette. She puffs, inhaling deeply before gently blowing the smoke right into his face. Which is crazy because Chris doesn't even smoke!

"Thanks, bartender," she says playfully, sticking the cigarette smack back into the center of her mouth.

"What'll it be?" is Bradley's sensitive reply.

Chris doesn't let up on the slow-seductive-husky tone. "I'll have a very dry vodka martini: rocks, twist, two olives and your phone number, sonny."

Bradley blinks a few times before turning to me. A tough act to follow, so I play it safe and order a somber scotch and water.

While Bradley is mixing the drinks, Chris turns to me. "Oh, I forgot to tell you . . . I've given up tranquilizers!"

"Congratulations. As of when?"

"As of this afternoon. I read in *Time* that they've linked abuse of tranquilizers with cancer. So no more."

"Good for you."

Bradley arrives with the drinks, places one in front of each of us, rings up the tally on a check and shuffles down to the other end of the bar to wait on another customer.

"Is he being aloof?" asks Chris.

"I don't think he's being aloof," I answer. "I think he's ignoring us."

"That makes a difference. You think he's upset?"

"I don't know if he's upset. I do think he's rude."

"Maybe we shouldn't've come."

"Of course, we shouldn't've come! I told you that."

"Well then, why are we here?"

"We are here because you insisted."

"Then why didn't you stop me?"

"There was no stopping you."

"It's all your fault."

"Wrong. I will not take the blame for this blunder. Let those who have wronged be responsible!"

"What is that, the curse of the canary people?"

"Just so you know who's at fault."

"Do you think we should leave?"

"Do you think we should stay?"

"Do you?"

"Do you?"

"One of us should make a decision."

"One of us should."

"Who?"

"You!"

"You!"

"Why *me*?"

"Why *ME*?"

"Because you got us here."

"Then let's leave."

"Fine. I'll get the check."

"I was hoping you would."

"Chris?"

"Yes?"

"You're quite a unique individual."

"Why, thank you."

"I didn't mean it as a compliment."

"Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't care if tranquilizers *are* conducive to cancer. I'm taking several tonight!"

I signal Bradley for the check. He comes over, saying not a word, totals the tab and hands it to me. Still no dialogue. I pay him, he thanks us cordially, and we leave.

I place a mummified Chris in a taxi, sending her home, and I guess you can imagine how upset she is.

The evening is still fairly young, and I'm, quite frankly, thanks to all this sexual tension in the air, a little horny. So I go to a nearby phone booth and call Wendy Chart-off.

Who sounds glad to hear from me but gives the impression of being unimpressed.

"Nice of you to call," she says, matter-of-factly.

"I thought I might drop by for a drink, Wendy."

"It's a little late, don't you think?"

"Oh, I don't know." This isn't going to be as easy as I thought. "It's just a wee past midnight."

"I'm already in bed."

Am I being punished for not having called earlier? "Well, then . . . all you have to do is move over."

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. Wise guy."

"Come on. What'd'ya say?"

"I couldn't possibly."

"Sure you could."

"Not tonight."

"Come on, Wendy. I really want to see you."

"I'm tired."

"I'll take care of that."

"Some other time, huh?"

This is getting to be hard work. "Hey, Wendy. I left my compact there. Can't I come over and pick it up?"

Tit for tat.

"Oh, Steve. . . ."

Her resistance just peaked. "I'm coming over, Wendy. I want to be with you right now, and I'm not going to hang around, standing on ceremony. I really, really want this. Don't say no!" If that speech doesn't do it, I'm turning in my Actors' Equity card.

"Oh . . . I don't know."

She's bending. "Come on, Wendy. A friend of mine told me about some terrific fun you can have with grape jelly."

"Sounds obscene."

"It is."

"Luckily, I happen to have a jar in the kitchen."

"Perfect. I'm jumping into a taxi."

When I arrive twenty minutes later, Wendy is in her nightgown and robe. Her hair is neatly brushed, and she's got on some fresh makeup.

"Come on in," she says invitingly. I step into the small apartment and make myself comfortable on her flowered couch.

"Can I get you something, Steve?"

"Got a beer?"

"Comin' up!" says Wendy, hurrying into her tiny kitchen. "I was watching the most wonderful old Cary Grant film on TV when you called," she offers from the kitchen, raising her voice. "*Penny Serenade*. You know it?"

"I've seen it," I yell.

"So sad." Wendy sighs, sluggishly returning with a bottle of beer and a glass. "Irene Dunne and he just lost their kid. Terrible drowning accident. So upsetting. I think maybe that's why I wasn't sure you should come over at first when you called," she lies. "I was so involved with the movie. I mean how do you go from being unhappy one moment and then the phone rings and poof, you're expected to pop up and be your old bubbly self? Well, I guess that's just not my style. Heh-heh-heh-heh."

Suddenly my interest in coming over here is fast diminishing. She goes on, apparently determined to be boring.

"Of course, I could watch Cary Grant in *anything*. He could read a road map, and I'd be fascinated. Heh-heh-heh. They don't make stars like that anymore, do they, Steve?"

Am I expected to contribute to this meaty conversation? Why is it her laugh never seemed so obnoxious before? I sip my beer and stare at her as she crawls up on the couch, sitting close to me. As expected, my silence makes her more uncomfortable, and so she continues babbling as I search the back of my brain, trying to recall the erotic image that made me place the phone call to her in the first place. And if I'm to get this show off the ground, I'd better make some move fast, else I'll soon be incapable of functioning at all. So



I place my beer down on her coffee table, stand and, unbuttoning my shirt, interrupt her mid-sentence and walk into her bedroom saying firmly, "Let's get going!"

Wendy follows me as I undress and pull down the sheets of her recently made bed. Going over to her stereo, she puts on Mahler's Third, which, it turns out, is an even better bet than Mahler's Fifth, leading me to believe perhaps I've more to learn from her than I'd supposed.

Wendy hops into bed and snuggles up next to me. We start to kiss, and not only is my heart no longer in this, neither is anything else. Placing my hand on top of her head, I slowly force her downward to the lower portion of my body. She picks up the none-too-subtle clue and goes to work.

Lying there on my back, running my fingers through her hair and massaging her naked shoulders, trying to get heated over the sporadic slurping and gagging sounds below me, I find myself drifting, fantasizing elsewhere. A beach, a grassy hill, a fireplace. The music swells, and the image changes. And the new image coming into focus, like always, as clear and certain, as touchable and real as all the other times I've dreamed this similar scenario, as Wendy, unsuspecting and out to pasture, works harder than ever, is of this woman locked together with me, wrapped and entwined so that our fleshs practically meld and our bodies unite in sensual, rhythmic thrusts, and I'm finally getting very excited, working this image very hard now, picturing the two of us breathing heavily together, and we're giving it all we've got, holding onto each other and squeezing whatever is there to reach out and touch in our abandon, and as I hold Wendy's head very tight and very stiff, forcefully instructing her just exactly how I want her to finish, and as this very erotic image peaks in a climax of its own, I fulfill my appointment with Wendy and, at the height of my own orgasm, see the face in the fantasy more clearly for the first time and, as always, it surprises me very little that the woman I've just imagined I've made love to is, of course, Chris.

The deed done, Wendy crawls back up into my arms, and I don't know about her, but I fall asleep sometime during the next three minutes.

The following morning over breakfast, things really fall apart. Wendy is too eager to please. If the toast is too dark, she'll gladly pop in another piece. If the coffee's too strong, she'll be only too happy to brew a fresh pot. If the sun's in my eyes, she'll lower the shade.

That sort of thing.

I respond by making matters worse. Sitting at her kitchen table, I get lost in the *Times* while she keeps reheating the toast, praying for a properly cooked piece.

Flipping the pages of the newspaper, I comment now and again about a particular story, just to let her know I'm aware there are two of us at the table. Predictably, this tack makes her even more fidgety.

Soon I dress and get ready to leave. Wendy walks me to the door. "When shall I see you again?" she asks, knowing I'm obviously not the type who likes to be pinned down.

"Soon," I tell her in as noncommittal a tone as possible.

"I'm so glad you came over," she says with too much enthusiasm.

"Me too," I say, blasé.

She's growing desperate.

I'm growing distant.

"Listen, my singing teacher's in your neighborhood. I've got a lesson Thursday afternoon. Why don't I drop by afterward?"

Whoops! Here comes the rush. "Thursdays are bad for me," I say off the cuff. She's picked up the message.

"Well, another time then." She shrugs.

Sometime I must examine this limit-testing streak. Treating women like rubber bands, stretching their tolerance levels until one of us snaps the relationship.

"Well, good-bye," I say. "Thanks for having me over."

"Sure. Thanks for the reminder," she replies, fairly hostile.

"What reminder?"

"I always forget how neurotic men are," she says, snapping the rubber band.

"Well, I hope it wasn't too unpleasant a lesson."

"No. Merely typical."

Sock-o. A shot below the belt. Good for her.

Kissing her on the forehead, I say, "Keep punching."

"You too, slugger!" she answers, very clever, closing the door behind me.

I return to my apartment a little after eleven. A few minutes later Chris calls.

"Guess who just phoned?" she asks, shockingly spritely.

"One of the Warner brothers."

"No, silly. Bradley."

"No fooling? What'd he want?"

"Catch this. He called to apologize for being cold to us last night. He was real happy to see me but . . . hold your pants . . . his *wife* was there, at the bar, drinking with friends. Can you believe that? We could've gotten a free peek at the enemy for the asking. Talk about irony, huh? He didn't want to be overly friendly for fear one of us might say the wrong thing or get a little too familiar or something. So you see, Steve, we were *right* to go there, after all!"

"Apparently."

"There's more."

"Go on."

"Bradley wanted to know how come we were there. Had I changed my mind about seeing him?"

"And you said. . . ."

"And I said what the hell, life was short, I guess I didn't mind being an afternoon lay, after all."

"And he said. . . ."

"And he said he'll see me Monday afternoon."

"And you said. . . ."

"And I said I'd be expecting him around one."

"Well. All's well that ends well."

"Yeah. . . ." Chris sighs blissfully.

"There's one more small detail, Chris. One loose end."

"What's that?"

"You owe me three seventy-five for the goddamn drinks!"

I think I told you how irrational auditions can be. Well, proving my point, Pat calls from the Morris office several afternoons later with word that I've been called back for *March into April*, the Broadway play for which I auditioned almost eight weeks ago. Astounding news, for sure. Pat tells me the reason we hadn't heard from them before this is, as rumored, they'd stopped holding auditions when the producers ran into difficulties raising funds to mount the show. Now that they've money in the bank again, however, they can once more afford to continue driving actors to psychiatrists.

But why those rude people would care to see me again is a mystery. In fact, the only explanation I can come up with is perhaps they liked what they didn't hear the first time.

Second auditions are a little easier to handle. For one thing, they're less crowded. For another, the management is less hostile and more attentive.

Reporting again to the Ethel Barrymore Theater Monday afternoon, I repeat the eight-week-old audition, again reading with the same very tall stage manager. I'm better equipped this time out: more confident, more in control.

The scene completed, I'm introduced to the producer, the director and the author. They ask me to look at another scene, taking place later in the play, and to come back in ten days for another callback.

This is encouraging as it means I've cleared another plateau.

Bicycling home through the cold January winds in splendid spirits, I allow myself the slightest fantasies about how great it will be to land the part and walk off with the Tony Award for Best Supporting Actor before Mike Nichols asks me to star in his next film, for which I pick up my first Oscar. Ah, success!

When I get to my apartment, I wake the bulldogs, announcing my good fortune. But they're not especially

interested, concentrating as they are solely on the dog biscuits being handed out in celebration. So I dial Chris' number and wait as it rings and rings, on and on, with no answer.

Just as I'm about to hang up, maybe twelve rings or so, someone finally answers.

But all I hear on the other end is the sound of the receiver dropping to the floor. I patiently wait several moments for it to be picked up again and for someone to say hello. But nothing like that happens. I can hear the muddled sound of a radio playing in the background, but no one is speaking to me.

Quickly remembering that today is Monday, the day Bradley was to come over, I suspect I may have interrupted a session. But that's not likely since if she were otherwise occupied, Chris would never have picked up the phone in the first place.

"HELLO!" I shout into the receiver.

No answer.

"Chris! PICK UP THE PHONE!"

Still no answer.

"ANYBODY HOME?"

Nothing.

I'm about to hang up when I hear the receiver being lifted.

". . . whash . . . itsh . . . I . . . cantsh . . ." is the inaudible dribble coming over the wire.

"I beg your pardon?" I say, confused.

". . . I . . . I . . . help . . . pleeje help . . ."

"Chris?"

". . . come . . . pleeje . . . Shteev. . ."

"WHAT'S THE MATTER?" I yell, pretty much petrified.

Clunk.

The phone on the other end falls to the floor. Again.

I'm not sure what's going on, but something in the pit of my stomach starts tying knots, sending adrenalin shooting every which way.



I run from my apartment and, grabbing a taxi, hurry over to Chris'. Rushing up the stairs, I unlock her door with my spare key and hurry inside.

I find her in the bedroom. Out cold. And Jesus, is she a mess. Her lip is cut open, puffed up and bloody. Her left eye is swollen and badly bruised. The telephone receiver, next to her, is off the hook, bleeping like crazy.

Lifting her up into a sitting position, I yell, "CHRIS!"

She shakes her head slowly, opens her eyes halfway and with what looks like a smile, waves her arm lethargically.

"... sssshhh ... don't sssshout ... " she manages to say.

Which, while not exactly coherent or decent diction, at least tells me she's alive.

I lower my voice, trying to conceal my near hysteria.

"Chris, what's going on here?"

"... noshing. ... "

"What do you mean nothing? What happened to you? What did you take?"

"... I didn't. ... wasch an axshident. ... "

"What was an accident?"

"... SSSSSH ... " she says, placing a finger on her lips.

"CHRIS"—I raise my voice again—"WHAT DID YOU TAKE?"

"... wha ... ?"

I slap her across the face. Hard.

"... OUCH! ... " She perks up a bit. "... wha ... are ya crajee?"

I grab both her shoulders and shake.

"... gonna be shick. ... "

Why didn't I think of that?

"Of course you're gonna be sick!" I yell, still shaking her back and forth.

Picking her up, I carry her into the bathroom. There I get her to put her finger down her throat until she gags and then throws up.

She seems more responsive already. So I turn the shower on, fairly cold, and somehow get both of us into it.

Standing there, fully dressed, fully drenched, the nearly chilly water cascading down over our bodies, Chris awk-

wardly lifts her head and, staring at me for the first time, asks, "... how ... waj ... your audishon. . . ?"

"Terrific," I tell her casually, like we were seated at the breakfast table. "They want to see me again."

Several minutes later we're in bed. I'm shoving hot black coffee down her throat, and she seems to be snapping out of it.

Which is good *and* bad.

Good because she is no longer O'Ding.

Bad because now that she can again think more clearly, she remembers why she was O'Ding in the first place, and remembering why she was O'Ding in the first place brings her to relentless sobbing.

Ten minutes ago I was dealing with a somnambulist. Now I've got an alternately shaking, coughing, hiccuping, foot-stomping, drooling, screaming, crying and particularly nauseated young lady on my hands.

It takes well over another half an hour and half a box of Kleenex to calm Chris down and almost get her to stop crying. And it's not until another hour after that, while I've got her propped up straight in a living-room chair, that I'm finally able to get her to speak clearly, without hysterics.

"I'm telling you it was an accident, Steve!" she says indignantly, wiping still another tear from her eye.

"Accident or not," I scold, "that's no condition to be in for the cocktail hour."

"I was fine, honest. Bradley came over, and I made us each a couple of powerful martinis. We smoked a little also and had a really nice time ... a little pornographic, perhaps, because he insisted on throwing dirty words at me while thrusting, but why not, right? He was taking his 'afternoon fuck' seriously. And I must say, in all honesty, I was throwing out a couple of the old four letterers myself. Just to keep it down and dirty. Oh, Steve, why did he do this to me?" And she again launches into one of her rounds of sobbing.

"Stop it, Chris. For Christ's sake, stop crying."

"I can't."

"You can. Stop until you've finished the story. Then I

promise I'll open a box of man-sized Kleenex and you can wail all night."

"You spoil me, Steve, that's your problem," she says, half crying and I think half laughing.

"Continue."

"All right. Well—" She interrupts again to blow her nose and wipe her eyes. "There we were, lying in bed next to each other, more asleep than awake. You know how it is right after sex."

"And?"

"And I turned over on my stomach to get closer to him and even a little affectionate and he turned to me and said, 'I've got to call my wife. Would you mind leaving the room?' And Steve, you just can't imagine what happened to me. It was like driving into a brick wall. In just that one terrible moment I sank so low, felt so cheap, so used, so awful, so dirty, I simply cannot tell you. Well, I guess I got a little hysterical, yelling and crying and hitting him a lot."

"Jesus!"

"Heavy, huh? Needless to say, Bradley got a little crazed himself, not knowing what to do with this raving maniac."

"What happened?"

"Well, I kept beating him and yelling and crying and I must admit it's a great tension releaser. Anyway, while I was beating against his chest with my fists, he somehow managed to get to my bottle of Valium on the night table. I was so hysterical and by this time so hypercrazy, I was even scaring myself. So I took four of the tranquilizers he handed me . . . or five . . . or six . . . I really don't remember, and then he waited and held me down the fifteen minutes or so it took for me to calm down."

"Incredible!"

"Don't interrupt. I'm coming to the best part. Pass me a tissue, Steve. I'm not sure I can get through this next segment."

I open a new box of Kleenex and hand it to Chris who snaps it from me like a squirrel hoarding chestnuts.

"I'm listening, Chris."

Another nose blow, and she continues. "So there we

were. Me writhing on the bed, Bradley sitting on top of me, holding me down. And I can't tell you at which point exactly things got erotic, but there's something incredibly sexy about being pinned to your bedsheets by a gorgeous naked man. Anyway, he got an erection which I think he was at first a little embarrassed about, but apparently not for long, as he decided to take advantage of the situation. And that really flipped me out. I started kicking and screaming and biting, and he kept getting harder and more insistent. I spit at him, there was nothing else I could do, being pinned down like that, and he belted me across the mouth and then hit me a few more times. The rest is show biz history."

I'm staring at Chris, hardly able to believe what she's just told me. Confused and fumbling for words, I stutter, "You . . . mmmmean. . . ."

"Yes, Steve. Your darling Chris has had her first rape." Now I'm crying.

Where it came from, I don't know. How it started, I can't say. But there I am in Chris' living room, and suddenly I'm the basket case.

Crossing to her and dropping to my knees, I bury my head in her lap. "How could anyone hurt you?" I whisper. "I'm sorry. So very, very sorry."

"Steve, get a hold of yourself. I was raped. Not mutilated. If you want to know the God's honest truth, it would've been terrific without the excessive violence."

"Wait'll I get a hold of him!"

"Don't be ridiculous. This isn't some Mafia vendetta, Steve! It's me. The only permanent damage has been to my ego."

"I'd better get some ice for that shiner," I say, hugging her.

"And some aspirins for headache, please."

"How many?"

"Eighty."

"Chris!"

"Forget the whole thing." She hugs me back. "Stay here. I need you."

I hug her even tighter. She caresses my hair.

"When did he leave?" I ask, lifting my head.

"Once it was all over, he lay next to me for a long while, catching his breath. I just lay there crying. It had all been so fast and strange, neither of us knew what to say. I mean, have you ever heard of after-rape conversation? I kept crying while he got dressed. Then he went to the door, and just as he left, he apologized for hurting me.

"I was so pent up and hysterical by then I grabbed the Valium and took five pills, having completely forgotten, mind you, that I'd already taken the others, plus the martinis, plus the grass. Then I cried myself to sleep while all the chemicals went to work."

"And then I called."

"Right."

"My darling. My poor, poor darling," I say, plopping my head in her lap again to cry some more.

Chris strokes my hair slowly and cries along with me.

Wiping away still another tear, she lowers her head and kisses the back of my neck. "Don't get too comfortable," she says, "I think I'm gonna throw up again."

"Just give me notice, huh?" I say, gently kissing her thigh.

"Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think being raped in late afternoon is cosmopolitan?"

"About as cosmopolitan as one could get."

"You know what, Steve?"

"What?"

Chris pauses a moment or two, takes my face in her hands and, looking down at me, says sadly, "I think I've come a long way from Seattle."



## Chapter Ten

Chris and I spend the remainder of the day glued to one another. Even well into the evening we just cling together like families you hear about drawn closer through trauma.

Eventually, we fall asleep on the couch, sleeping securely through the night.

In the morning I tell Chris I don't want to leave. I feel so close to her, so compatible, so *needed*. She seems an empty orphan. Open, vulnerable, abandoned, and I simply have this unexplainable desire to protect and care for her.

So I move in for a few days.

Dogs, vitamins, toothbrush, shirts and half a dozen cans of Alpo chopped beef.

And it doesn't take more than a day or two for the swelling in Chris' lip to subside, the discolored bruise around her eye to fade and for the bloom in her cheek, the laughter in her smile and the madness in her logic to return to their normal, bizarre ways.

Since she's appearing Off-Broadway, the show'll be dark the next couple of days, and she won't have another until Wednesday. So at least her rape scene was well timed.

We stay at home until then, finding it easier to deal with ourselves than the cold, cruel world of reality lying outside our door, waiting to pounce on us again dare we stray.

We play games. Monopoly and Clue and Charades and Movie Moguls and Gin Rummy and Canasta and Old Maid, and she teaches me to read the tarot cards and I teach her poker and we bake an absurd unintentionally upside-down

cake which comes out so soggy we throw it away and we leave only to walk the dogs in the cold rain, hurrying back to shred old newspapers, starting a fire in her ancient fireplace which almost suffocates us when it backfires, darkening the room in a black fog of soot and smoke.

We rehearse, over and over again, the scene I'm to do from *March into April* at my next callback. I'm feeling more comfortable with the part all the time, developing and rounding out various aspects of who the character is. And who he is just happens to be who I am, so the more I work on it, the more I realize this is a role I was born to play.

Days later I start picking up Chris after performances of *Another Straw* and sometimes we go out for a bite with the cast and sometimes we drift uptown by ourselves, stopping perhaps for a hamburger at Joe Allen's and that sexual charge, that subtle but ever-present bolt of surging juice cascading down through my loins has never been so flowing and I'm thinking about making some kind of move and I know she's waiting for me to make some kind of move, but both of us are afraid of any move being made because we're getting so much at this level, we're fearful this may be the peak and pushing ourselves one last step into the intense realm of sex could mean bliss or trouble, but since everything is going so rib-tickling well without it, I patiently wait, hoping it will work itself out.

After a week or so of this the cast of Chris' revue notices the change in our closeness and rib her about how thick we've become.

On Tuesday of the second week I return once more to the Ethel Barrymore Theater for my third reading.

"Alfred" has never been so close to me. We are as one. I pride myself in eliciting several laughs from the people sitting in the orchestra reviewing me.

The director likes the reading, gives me a few pointers on how he wants it interpreted and then asks me to read the scene again.

Which I do, taking into account his new touches.

It goes rather smoothly, I think, and I'm thanked and sent on my way.

Later in the afternoon, I speak with Pat, who calls to say the reading went very well. She spoke with the producers and they thought I was terrific and are *very interested*. They told Pat not to commit me to anything before speaking with them for first refusal.

Good news, indeed.

And that evening, when Chris returns home from the Village she brings more good news, reporting that the cast of *Another Straw* had been summoned onstage for a meeting after the show and told they shall, indeed, be moving up-town to the Plaza in three weeks.

I rush out to the corner liquor store and return shortly with a chilled bottle of Cordon Rouge.

Sitting in front of the fireplace with the dogs, we sip champagne and fantasize about what might come to pass should things keep heading in these upwardly mobile directions.

So, of course, in no time the subject turns to sex.

"No way!" protests Chris feverishly. "I'm having the time of my life. I'm not going to fuck it up by fucking it up."

"I'll drink to that!" I halfheartedly toast, clicking Chris' nearly empty glass. She drinks too, draining what she's got left.

I refill her glass. She turns around, lying down, resting her head on my lap and, staring at the fire, says, "I can't remember ever being happier."

I lean over and kiss her forehead.

We finish the bottle and eventually fall asleep together there on the floor: Ruth to my left, Harry to my right, Chris saddled in my middle.

The following Wednesday afternoon it begins to snow. A fine, light, powdery snow which does its best to blanket a gray city in a fresh whitewash.

Chris tells me a meeting's been called after the performance tonight, probably to discuss the transfer up-town, and since she has no idea how late it might run, why don't I wait at home for her and then we'll see about dinner?

Fine.

I spend much of the day reading and rereading *March into April*, preparing for my fourth callback. Sitting by the window, I watch as the snow turns from light to heavy and count as the accumulation on the ledge rises, like a slow-baking cake, four or five inches.

Chris returns to the apartment around eleven and POW! . . . we're right back where we started. Her eyes are puffed and red. Her shattered demeanor has dropped below sea level. Her hair is limping wet, and she's covered in snow.

She takes one look at me and, rushing over with opened arms, bursts into tears.

"Oh, Steve! Oh, no! Oh, no! Oh, no!"

"What's the matter?" I ask, more puzzled than you can imagine.

"I knew it was all going too well."

"What happened?"

"It's too awful. Too awful. I'm *so* upset. I had no idea."

"What?"

"The tarot cards said be careful. I wouldn't listen. Oh, Steve. Oh, Steve!"

"Chris, we can't talk about it if you don't tell me what happened."

"It's devastating! Just devastating. I knew it couldn't last. I've been walking around town since you moved in saying, 'I'm the luckiest girl in the world; everything's going my way.' But I should've known. I should've known."

"You're not making any sense, Chris."

"Who says it's supposed to make sense, huh? I was sure things were so safe, nothing would crack."

"Stop crying, Chris. Please! I can't help if you don't tell me what's going on."

Chris backs away and, standing tall, says, "Marty called me into his office before the meeting tonight. He said the move uptown was all arranged, but now there was one problem . . . me and Dolores are too similar in type, and since there are only three girls in the revue, some of the backers thought it might be a good idea if one of us was replaced."

"Oh, shit."

"Oh, shit is right!" insists Chris, blowing her nose. "So of course, with my luck, they decided *I* should be the one to go."

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry."

"Wait!" says Chris, raising her voice. "That's not the topper. The final blow is that the girl they've picked to replace me, it's a good thing you're sitting for this one, Steve, 'cause it's sure to knock you on your ass . . . the girl going uptown to the Plaza instead of yours truly . . . is Wendy Chartoff!"

Dazed, my mouth drops open. "Holy shit!"

"Holy shit is right!" repeats Chris, stamping her foot to the ground. "Wendy fucking Chartoff! YOUR FUCKING FRIEND!"

"Chris, you can't be mad at me! It's not as if I planned it this way."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course, it's not your fault. BUT IF YOU EVER SPEAK TO HER AGAIN, YOU CAN SAY GOOD-BYE TO OUR FRIENDSHIP AND THAT'S FINAL!"

"Speak to who?"

"Wendy?"

"Wendy *who*?" I asked sincerely, which happily brings a smile to Chris' face. She draws close and hugs me.

"You think this is gonna slow my career, Steve?" She sniffles.

"Don't be ridiculous!" I say assertively. "Ain't nothing gonna come between you and success!"

"You think not?"

"I know not! And as far as that shitty show is concerned, *Phfft!* It don't mean diddley. They'll be nothing without you. In fact, if you want to know the honest truth, I think it's a *big* mistake moving that baby uptown. I don't think they're ready. I think it'll bomb badly."

"Do you?" Chris asks in quiet, childlike wonder.

"I do. You wait and see. This may be the best thing could've happened. You'll probably get into something much better right away."

"Oh, God, I hope so," says Chris, throwing her arms



around me. "I've always wanted to do a musical. It's all I dreamed about when I was a kid."

"Let me tell you something, Chris. Good times are just around the corner. In fact . . . hold your horses . . . they're here! Get dressed!"

"I am dressed!"

"I mean get redressed. Put on something warm. Some thermal underwear. A few more sweaters, several pairs of socks, your heavy coat, a scarf, your gloves, anything you can find!"

"Are you crazy?!"

"I'm not crazy!" I roar. "I'M INSANE!"

"But what's it all for?"

"Don't you know? *WE'RE GOING TO PLAY IN THE SNOW!*"

Like children, the two of us bundle up in layer after layer after layer of clothes. By the time we've finished we look like a couple of rotund chubbies on their way to the playground.

Sneaking down to the basement, we borrow a sled belonging to one of the kids of Chris' next-door neighbors. "Rosebud" under wraps, we head out for the untamed wilderness of Central Park.

New York in a heavy snow is one of the great paradises. Nothing moves. Nothing's dirty. Nothing's noisy. Nothing matters. Everything stops and stands still, at least for a few fabulous hours.

"*Now-hold-on!*"

"No! I'm afraid!"

"Hold onto my waist!"

"No! We'll be killed!"

We're at the top of some teeny hill in Central Park sitting on our sled. I'm commanding the ship and trying to convince Chris to be my passenger. But mutiny's in the air. She wants no part of it.

"It'll be just like *Ethan Frome!*" she yells.

"Good. Can you think of a more dramatic way to punch out?"

Chris shrugs. "I guess not." Closing her eyes tightly, she yells, "All right; I'm ready; lead on!"

Giving us the necessary push over the top, I holler, "Damn the torpedoes. Full speed ahead!" as we go sailing down the hill. Chris panics midway and tilts the damn sled over. We lie mangled together in the snow, screaming at each other so loudly we barely hear the sled crashing into a tree below us.

Chris scoops up a mound of snow and hurls it at me, missing. I jump on her, and the two of us continue rolling down the hill, one over the other, until we finally hit bottom. There Chris dunks my head in some fresh powder. Roaring in mock anger, I start chasing her. She's pretty fast though and almost gets away. With one last spurt, however, I deliver a flying tackle to the back of her knees, bringing her down to the soft white ground.

We roll around in the eight-inch accumulation awhile longer, tossing snow in each other's faces. The dark orange-gray cloud above us sits low on the city, cutting visibility considerably, rendering objects past a distance of fifty feet almost unrecognizable. We walk, trailing our sled behind us, down to the Sheep Meadow and watch as the quiet, empty city all around us transforms itself into a fantasy of whipped-cream dessert.

Finally, drenched and exhausted, we plow our way from our private forest, through the accumulating drifts, back to Chris' apartment.

It takes forever to peel off our mounds of clothing, all by now thoroughly soaked. Chris puts on a bathrobe, and I wrap myself in a towel. She goes to the kitchen to make some hot chocolate. I shred some newspapers and throw a small log on the fire.

"I'm shivering," calls Chris from the kitchen, stirring the hot chocolate.

"I'll fix that," I call back, going into the bathroom to draw a hot bath.

There's some strawberry bubble bath on the windowsill which I dump into the bathtub. Then I throw in some body

oil, spray in a few squirts of Chanel #5 mist and add a dollop of shaving cream for good measure.

Chris walks into the bathroom just as I light a couple of candles, turn off the bulb and turn on the stereo.

"Here!" she says, handing me a steaming cup of hot chocolate.

"Thanks. Your bath is almost ready, madam."

"How nice. I'm freezing." Chris takes a sip of her hot chocolate and then disrobes.

Climbing into the sudsy tub, she looks up and asks, "Won't you join me?"

It takes me three-quarters of a second to get out of my towel and plop into the tub. In fact, I think I touch bottom before she does.

"Mmmmm," hums Chris, sinking low until the bubbles are up to her neck.

I hand her a hot chocolate, pick up my own, and there we sit, at either end of the tub, facing each other, our legs partially outstretched, sipping marshmallow-topped hot chocolate in our strawberry candlelit bubble bath as snow keeps climbing outside our window.

From that point on the two of us exchange not a word.

Moving closer to her, I take a huge sponge and wash her feet. She smiles when the sponge tickles her soles. Moving still closer, I wash her calves and then her thighs.

She stops smiling.

Picking up a large sponge of her own and placing her legs astride both sides of my waist, Chris begins massaging my chest and stomach.

I edge even closer and wash up and down her arms before moving the sponge up to her neck and then slowly down to her breasts. Her sensitive nipples respond to my fondling, so I press down slightly harder on the sponge.

Chris drops *her* sponge and continues to massage now with just her hands. She moves them slowly, tantalizingly across my wet shoulders and down my back.

I elicit the softest moan of pleasure and put my sponge aside. Placing my hands on her rounded breasts, I softly knead them. She purrs quietly.

We look at each other for a long time, still massaging, still stroking, still not speaking.

At last I take her hand and help us both out of the bath.

Taking a large towel for myself, I then hand another to Chris. I begin drying her, wiping away the mountains of bubbles still beautifully clinging to her glistening body.

She dries me, too, with long, soft strokes, removing the excess suds all over me.

I drape my towel around her shoulders, and she does the same with hers on mine. Taking her hand, I lead her into the bedroom. Still not a word.

After pulling down the covers, we crawl into bed. Placing my arms underneath her, I hug tightly while enjoying the sensation of our two naked bodies rubbing against each other.

Lifting her chin and taking my eyes away from hers for the first time, I bring my mouth down to those lovely lips.

We kiss for a long, long while.

I try swallowing her chin and kissing her nose and her eyes and practically drown her ears with my saliva. Overwhelmed by the depths of her sensuality, I want to kiss all of her. Our breathing gets progressively heavier.

She moves down to my nipples, which she chews on tenderly, before circling them with her tongue. Wanting so much of her, so badly, for so long, I know not where to begin. So I squeeze her buttocks, and she moans and runs her fingernails up and down my scalp, scratching ever so gently. We stare at each other while her fingers comb through and pull my hair. Nothing's ever seemed so exciting. Diluted in this runaway euphoria, I bring my mouth down to the magic of her beautiful triangle. It's all too fabulous, too incredible.

Chris sits up and then lies down in the other direction so that her feet face my head and vice versa. Riveted now by sensuous anticipation, I get lost in her as she leans forward and takes the whole of my extended penis in her mouth.

We remain this way, intoxicated with each other for some time until, ready to burst, I back off. Sitting up, I bring her into my arms, kissing her all over and then, lowering her



again, place her head back on the pillow. We stare at each other again, roving our fingers across our bodies. She squeezes my back and shoulder muscles vigorously.

Lost in kisses, I move around, getting on top of her. Wrapping one of her thighs around each of my arms, I ease forward and teasingly move my erection up and down, titillating the outside of her wetted vagina, pausing several moments to savor her excitement.

The room seems to be spinning. All I can see, though, is her, outlined in total beauty and giving.

We are both softly moaning now, so I gently spread her thighs again and gradually part the delicate softened lips. Bringing my body into position ever so carefully, never taking my eyes away from hers, I push my way down and forward, slowly, slowly until I'm finally deep within her. Abandoning all sense of time and place, relishing the magnetic thrill, both of us look at one another, rejoicing in our complete understanding.

I lean forward, placing a palm of each hand on either side of her head for support, and kiss her again and again, and I don't want this to ever end. Not ever.

Then, together, we begin a rhythmic thrust. We build and build and our moans of pleasure grow louder and I've never known such sensations and Chris is going wild, tossing her head first left and then right and I know she's coming because I can feel the wetness within, so I thrust even harder and she screams out my name, which is the first verbal communication between us in the past hour, and I wait a moment or so, holding back before thrusting again.

"I can't believe this," I say softly. "Can't believe how fabulous."

Chris starts to build again and I know she's drawing close to a second orgasm. "Steve!" she moans. "You don't know. . . . You don't know!"

"I know," I answer. "I do know. Come on. Come on, babe!" I coax her. "COME ON!"

And there it comes again, that fabulous wetness, lubricating my entire cock with its welcome envelopment.

"Oh, Steve," she moans. "OH, STEVE!"



I flop down again, licking her entire face as I shove a pillow beneath the small of her back. I've lost all restraint by now. There is nothing but her.

Thrusting again, even more forceful than before, I can't contain myself any longer, so I begin to let loose.

Leaning back slightly, I grab both her hands and bring them up alongside each of her shoulders, entangling her fingers within mine, holding on with all I've got. I thrust forward again, and a warm current from someplace deep, deep within starts tingling, traveling up from God knows where, circling my testicles before gathering for a final moment at the base of my erection.

"CHRIS! BABY! NOW!" I roar, thrusting a final, giant jab inside her, and all that juice gathered at the base of my cock surges upward and out, shooting far into her, wave after wave after wave. I let out some final, indistinguishable moan, some animal sound of sublime release.

And Chris welcomes my semen with a third, incredible orgasm of her own, meeting my come with oceans of her own juice. Our two liquids unite, celebrating these endless gifts of sensations.

"MY GOD, STEVE!" shouts Chris. "MY GOD!"

The last of me drains deep within her before I collapse on top of her. Lifting my head slowly, I hold her face in my hands and kiss and kiss her, and we simply cannot get enough of each other.

Finally, I hold her head steady a moment and whisper, "I love you, Chris. I've always loved you."

## *Chapter Eleven*

Seconds later, Chris and I both fall asleep for a long while, snow, suds and sex having taken their energizing tolls.

I'm momentarily aroused from blissful slumber when she snuggles up next to me. Placing my arm around her with care, I'm taken by surprise when I find her hips much thinner and her chest hairier than I remember.

Opening my eyes, I find Ruth lying between us, looking up at me sadly.

"Sorry, miss. Not tonight," I tell the bulldog, pushing her off the bed onto the floor. "We'll save the ménage for another time, if you don't mind." Ruth does mind, though. Scorned by my love for another woman, she returns to the warmth of Chris' closet, where she collapses next to Harry and releases her fury by snoring even louder than usual.

I cuddle next to Chris and kiss her forehead. She wakes with a soft smile and extends her arms to me.

We embrace and are in no time engaged again in lovemaking. It's another glorious encounter intensified, if that's possible, by the growing familiarity of the workings of our respective heightened awarenesses.

Afterwards we fall asleep again; stirring only to get more comfortable, moving closer together. And each time one of us wakes, he embraces the other as a welcome longlost friend before dozing off again.

Somewhere around five thirty in the morning I open my eyes and find Chris staring directly back at me.

We blink at each other a few times until Chris quietly asks, "Steve?"

"Yes?"

"I'm starving!"

"What should we eat?"

"I don't know. Let's sneak into the kitchen, kill a few cockroaches and see what's there."

Watching the sun rise over a snow-covered Riverside Drive, while breakfasting on bacon and eggs, whole wheat toast, coffee, thirteen multihued vitamin tablets and a Miss Grimble's cheesecake can be a lot of fun.

Especially if you've just fallen in love.

Now I don't mean to get mushy, honest, and I know I've always been one of your more cynical skeptics on the subject, sloughing it off as kid stuff and antics that only happen in films.

BUT. . . .

When it finally comes along, I'm afraid it's just as all the clichés in all the musical numbers in all the movies suggest.

Chris and I support this by singing, yes, singing to each other over the breakfast table all those songs of love we grew up on at Saturday matinees.

Once our medley's completed, Chris, looking at me very intensely, says, "I've always wanted to fall in love with someone who would sing to me the way Gordon McRae did to Doris Day."

"Well, now you have. And all I can say about it is, 'What a day this has been, what a rare mood I'm in. . . .'"

Chris picks it up. "Why, it's almost like being in love. . . ."

And the two of us finish the song.

Three songs, two cups of coffee and another piece of cheesecake later, I look at Chris. She looks back at me, totally absorbed. We gaze at each other like this for an awfully long time, sighing a lot, until I finally break the stare. "What happened?" I ask quietly.

"What happened when?" questions Chris, confused, though still eyeball to eyeball.

"What happened to us? I thought we were supposed to be friends."

"So?"

"I mean . . . I can't believe it finally happened. What made you change your mind?"

"Come on, Steve. Don't play games. You were there. Didn't I always say we would when and if it was meant to be?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was and we did!"

"I've never felt this way before about anyone."

"That sounds like something you should have told someone when you were sixteen."

"I'm a slow learner."

"True."

"How many times does this make for you, Chris?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

"In love?"

"Yes."

"You don't just mean crushes or casual affairs or infatuations or unrequited romances or one-way scenes, huh? You mean *love*, the real thing."

"Right. How many times?"

"Eight!"

"*EIGHT?*"

"Yeah, eight. There was Alan in high school and Carl in college, and then I thought I loved Arthur, so I married him. Then Eddie, then Hal, though he was married, then. . . ."

"Never mind."

"You asked."

"I'm sorry."

"But you wanna know something, Steve?"

"Sure."

"Of all the loves I've known, through all the good times and all the shit, I don't think I've every been happier than right now."

"God, I love you!"

"And I want you to know that no matter what happens between us, Steve, I'll always—"

"What do you mean? No matter what happens? Nothing's gonna happen. We're going to be fine. That's all."

"Wouldn't that be nice?"

"It *will* be nice. Listen, Chris. I've waited thirty years for this and would happily wait another thirty for what we've just experienced. I've never felt such love for anyone."

"Be careful, Steve. Keep talking this way and I'll soon start lowering my defenses and you know better than anyone when I give myself it's a total thing."

"I welcome it."

"My shrink always said if I were to learn one thing from therapy, it's not to run into a relationship too soon."

"Good advice. Chris, my darling, we've had five years' practice."

"We have, haven't we?" she says, more in amazement than conviction, before adding, "There are only two things I want out of life."

"One is to do a musical."

"Right. And the other is to find a man, just one, out of all I've wanted, who would once return the love I'm prepared to give."

"Chris, you're looking at him."

"Come on."

"Cross my heart."

"You actually, seriously, in your heart of hearts think we've got a shot at it?"

"I only have one thing to say about it."

"What's that?"

And I launch into a downbeat rendition of:

I have often walked  
down this street before,  
but the pavement  
always stayed beneath my feet before.

And Chris joins me in harmony, as we both sing:



All at once am I  
several stories high,  
knowing I'm on the street  
where you live.

And that is more or less the way Chris and I spend the rest of our first morning in love.

And our second.

And our third.

All of it marked by ridiculous antics, constant lovemaking and by Chris' continually coming up with new reasons why it can't work between us. This is followed regularly by my dismissing her excuses and then reassuring her everything's fine. Just relax.

I'm always with her. Always there. Always on call; twenty-four hours a day.

Sometimes, even in the very early hours of the morning, I'll roll closer to her in bed and pinch those two scrumptious buns, letting her know I'm still with her even when she's out cold.

Quite an exhilarating experience, this business of being in love for the first time. Wonderfully all-consuming in the attentive energy it requires.

I want to tell you just exactly what it is that produces the glow, just what it is that now brings design and purpose to my every day, just what it is that has so swiftly relegated all previous sexual encounters to meaningless bodily functions.

I want to tell you all these things, but I cannot.

I cannot, furthermore, tell you where in the biochemical makeup of my body such rewarding feelings of elation first stir. I can't tell you what it was that first gave the go-ahead to my normally limited range of emotional outpourings, suddenly running them rampant, expanding and blossoming as they are.

No. I don't know the whys or hows of any of these incredible changes in me.

I do know, though, I want them never to stop.

With everything else, certainly one of the nicer aspects of

our collective happiness has been retaining the same sound friendship as before. We still joke about the same ridiculous things and argue with the same ferocity and enjoy the other's company at least as much as before.

We're having such a good time, in fact, we decide to move over to my place for a while.

Our apartments are similar one-bedroom affairs, both on fourth floors in old, time-eaten buildings.

The big difference between them, actually, is that Chris' apartment is in a walk-up. Mine at least has the added luxury of an ancient, craggy elevator that may or not arrive on the floor of your choice in fits and starts.

And one hundred and forty-five combined pounds of stubborn bulldog travel better by elevator than by pushing, pulling, lugging, tugging, shoving and dragging those two wheezing fatties up and down four long, narrow, squeaking flights of peeling stairwell.

It's a rather smooth transition over to my place, and things continue to climb, progressively getting better, growing stronger. We're forever demonstrative, constantly caring and always arousing each other. My repeated reassurances to Chris eventually pay off as she gradually relaxes into believing and finally accepting how well everything's working out.

And seeing her relax, at last seemingly secure in my total commitment, puts me at ease, placing me less on the lookout for trouble.

We can each freely and openly admit we've never been happier.

I bicycle around Manhattan nowadays, swerving in and out of honking cars, singing news of my romance to the tops of buildings as I pedal along carefree, blindly ignoring cabs and trucks cutting me off, trying to kill me.

I'm Gene Kelly singing in the rain; Donald O'Connor breaking all the balloons; Louis Jordan running around the fountains of Paris.

I'm in love, and it's just as MGM always promised.

Day after day, week after week, I assault acquaintances I run into on the street who make the mistake of mechanical-

ly asking, "What's new?" I flaunt them with a barrage of enthusiasm, going into great detail, ranting on and on about Chris, Chris, Chris. *LOVE*, I tell them, is "what's new!"

Yes, it's true!

Love has indeed landed on Seventy-second Street, and as the next five weeks go by, nothing else matters.

We're in love. We're happy. We're on top of the world.

Nothing even remotely precarious about it.

Now that includes just about everything two people could hope for together, doesn't it?

And all this sounds just like the best happily-ever-after situation possible, right? Just like in the movies, right?

Wrong!

If you really want to get depressed, read on.

## *Chapter Twelve*

"How could I be so lucky?" asks the voice of Chris somewhere in the back of my head.

"What did you say?" I mutter, basically still asleep.

"I asked how I could be so lucky."

"That's nice," I summon, rolling my tongue around the inside of my dry mouth, chomping my teeth.

"Well?" comes a definitely insistent tone.

Well, what? I ask myself, surfacing toward reality.

"Something's wrong somewhere, Steve. It's impossible to be this happy!"

There!

She did it. She woke me. Opening my eyes with a squint, I focus in on Chris, flat on her back, eyes glued to the ceiling, one hand on her stomach, one hand on mine. "What'd you say?" I ask again, though I'm sure it's for the first time.

"Nothing. I was just talking out loud."

"What time is it?" I grunt, maneuvering my head over to the digital clock, getting a five thirty-two reading, before moaning disagreeably, "Why the hell are you waking me?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Because?"

"I'm so happy."

"Chris, no one loses sleep over being too happy."

"I wasn't. I was lying here wondering how much longer we've got."

Patience.

"Let's go back to sleep for a few hours, huh, Chris? Let's

not worry ourselves over not having anything worth worrying about, okay?"

"You know, good things don't last forever."

"That's yesterday's news," I say, plotting a way to fall back to sleep while giving her the impression she's got my undivided attention.

" 'Nothing Gold Can Stay'! That's Robert Frost!"

"What'd he know?"

"Don't make light of this, Steve. I'm getting *very* upset!"

Patience. Patience. "All right!" I say, actually taking the trouble to sit up in bed, looking her directly in the eye. "I promise not to make light of this. Tell me what's bothering you."

"Well, I . . . I'm not sure."

"That's not bad for a start. But what was the question?"

"The question was: How could I be so lucky?"

I lean over and kiss her nose, allaying all fears, I hope, by adding, "No, Chris. The question is, 'How could *I* be so lucky?' "

Chris throws her arms around me, singing "I love you!"

Kissing her nose again, I send the signal directly back to the source. "And I love you, Chris. Very, very much."

Chris sighs a joyful release.

"Now can we join the dogs in going back to sleep for a while?"

"But I'm not tired."

"Then why don't you get up and read?"

"I don't feel like reading."

"Well, there must be a happy medium."

"There is. On Seventy-ninth Street. I went to see her last August. She told me I'd be falling in love with a brilliant actor, and she was right."

"Gotcha. All right, kid. You're on your own. I know not what course others may take, but as for me, I'm going to bed!"

"Okay. Good night, Steve."

"Good night, Chris."

"See you in a few hours."

Right! Now what was I dreaming?



"Did you hear me, Steve? I said I'll see you in a few hours!"

This is getting silly. "And I'll see *you* in a few hours."

"I'll miss you," purrs Chris.

"And I'll miss *you!*"

"Sweet dreams, darling."

"Sweet dreams to *you!*"

Lifting the covers over my shoulders, I turn over on my stomach, and as I close my eyes again, the voice in the girl next to me, still, I assume, staring at the ceiling, says matter-of-factly, "Face it. It can't last!"

Patience. Patience. Patience. Let's remember with whom we are dealing. But why is she again flaunting her insecurities?

I'd laid all doubts to rest weeks ago. Yet here she is, popping up, out of the blue, insisting again, with no justification, that it can't last.

I must remember how nervous she gets. Perhaps since she sees how much stronger it's grown between us, so much better each day, she may be afraid the deeper she gets, the harder she'll fall.

I'll just have to be even more reassuring. I've got to let her know I'm here to stay. I love and at least half understand her.

I'm determined to make this thing work.

Period.

Several evenings later Chris asks, "Steve, have we planned anything for tomorrow night?"

"I don't think so."

"Good. My friend Astin wants to get together with us for dinner."

"Who's Astin?"

"Astin. Astin Mondale. You've heard me talk about Astin. My art designer friend."

"No. I don't think so."

"Oh, I must have. We met on the Clairol set and have since become friends."

"I don't remember."

"Well, it doesn't matter, really. You'll meet him tomorrow, and I just know you'll adore each other."

The following evening Chris and I travel down to the Village to visit her new friend before we all go out to eat.

Well.

An amazingly slight, charming, almost whimsical fellow, a veritable shriveled prune of a man with the most enormous mustache, opens the door and leads us into an apartment I do great injustice by calling unusually cluttered.

The whole of the small three-room place is a mess. And I don't just mean a mess. I mean a *MESS!*

Scattered about every which way are a myriad of dirty dishes, loose shoes and socks with holes, tiny marbles, a turned-over lamp still lit, a half-eaten, very old TV dinner, yards of string, wads of already-chewed gum, loose tobacco, half a dozen newspapers, ashtrays rampant with butts and ashes, crooked hanging pictures, piles of records with no jacket covers, closets so stuffed they haven't space for another item, empty, label-less beer bottles, moth-eaten sweaters, greasy, egg-stained silverware, both clean and dirty laundry folded or strewn every which way, broken collar stays, melted rubber bands, broken-pointed pencils, dried felt-tipped pens, torn grocery bags, carrot peelings, endless candy wrappers, dozens of scattered vitamin bottles, yards of unraveled toilet paper strung festively about like crepe paper streamers at a birthday party and I swear twenty back issues of *House Beautiful*.

And that's just the hallway.

The rest of the place is worse.

We fight our way into what I assume must be the living room, clear away enough clutter to find what looks like the couch and sit down in a puff of dust.

Astin walks over to us, picks up a filthy sock, twirls it around his wrist and, shrugging his shoulders in part apology and part explanation, announces, "*Art is chaos!*"

Astin then tells us how he's usually neat as a pin. But when he flies off into one of his rages of creativity, he insists on being surrounded by the security of runaway debris.

"I take it you're having a creative period then?" I foolishly ask.

"You noticed," answers Astin, proudly pointing to his latest achievement.

And there on opposite walls are these two enormous canvases both of which are painted off-white. Period. There is nothing else on them.

"Brilliant!" exclaims Chris. "Where do you get your ideas?"

Astin and Chris now delve into an obtuse, in-depth discussion to which I contribute little principally because I have no idea about what it is they're speaking.

"Plain is plane," labels Chris.

"Life as a white womb!" answers Astin.

"The appearance of reality," submits Chris.

Astin's not so sure. "Or is it," he ponders, "the reality of appearance?"

And so on.

Eventually, Astin goes into his contaminated kitchen, returning with tasty little fruit-nut bars created from Alice B. Toklas' original recipe.

And after an hour or so we are all very stoned, even if more zonked on a paralyzing stupor than anything else.

The three of us eventually manage miraculously to make our way over to Astin's favorite neighborhood Bulgarian restaurant for some inedible substances the menu unknowingly refers to as dinner.

Afterward, in the taxi ride uptown, Chris clamors enthusiastically, "Well, didn't you just *love* him?"

"He seems very nice."

"Nice? He's brilliant!"

"He must be to live that way."

"What way?"

"In that pigsty."

"That was no pigsty. That was organized disorder!"

"Chris, that place was a disaster area!"

"Don't be ridiculous. You're just being difficult because you feel threatened by Astin."

"Threatened? That's absurd. He seems very pleasant. I just don't see why you need someone like him."

"He's my friend."

"No, Chris. I'm your friend."

"No. You're my lover."

Well, since I have no clue to how I might combat that particular breakdown in communication, I change the subject by picking a fight with the taxi driver, commenting on how much I miss John Lindsay ever since he left the mayor's office.

But the subject of Chris' friend, Astin, is hardly over. In fact it's just begun.

In the days ahead, he steadily becomes more and more a permanent part of our lives.

Chris speaks with him on the phone at least once in the morning and again in the afternoon. He is soon joining us for dinner a couple of times a week and accompanying us to movies, meeting us at parties, and unless I'm going crazy, it sure seems the two of them are finding a lot more to laugh about than the two of us. Although I find him a pleasant enough oddball, he's starting to get on my nerves. At least, though, now I understand why all of Chris' boyfriends had always felt such resentment toward me. Now that I've been sort of replaced by Astin on that level, I feel hostility toward me, uh, him, too.

I even run into him at the Benton & Bowles Agency late one afternoon, while waiting to audition for a Pampers commercial. As it turns out, in fact, he's the art director assigned to the spot. We chat for several minutes, mostly about the one interest we share (Chris) until I'm called.

In the commercial I'm playing a new father, shamelessly ignorant of how a pair of Pampers are capable of sponging up a tidal wave of wetness until my wife, who knows better, I guess, because she's read the script, displays our deliriously happy, bone-dry Pampered baby.

"Excellent!" says the director, after we've taped it. "Just what I wanted. Let's do a second take . . . just for insurance."

So we tape it again, and once more the director claims

how terrific he thought it was. After he thanks us most profusely, repeating again how right we each were, I leave the studio.

Outside, in the reception area, I run into Astin again, who's been hanging around to find out how I did. I tell him it went rather well and he tells me he's meeting Chris in a few minutes at P. J. Clarke's and would I like to join them.

Would *I* like to join *THEM*?

So here we are, in the back room at Clarke's, me, Chris and my new best friend, huddled around a table designed for midgets, munching on hamburgers, as Chris announces, "I was asked to audition for the *most* exciting job today!"

"Tell us."

"Doing the lead in *Sugar* for five weeks in dinner theaters around Dallas."

"Terrific," I say. "When's the tryout?"

"Never." Chris shrugs. "I turned it down."

"You didn't!"

"I did!"

"But why?"

"Simple. I told my agent I was just too much in love to even consider leaving home for five minutes. Five *weeks* was obviously out of the question."

"Oh, Chris!" I sigh, putting down my hamburger. "What a foolish thing to do. You can't afford to turn down that much money and that big a credit."

"I can afford to do anything I wish!"

"But if they think you won't travel, they'll just stop calling. You might at least have gone through with the audition. And a musical, Chris. I mean, really! What more do you want?!"

"I think it's thrilling!" Astin chimes in.

"What's that?" I ask, trying to conceal my impatience at his intrusion.

"The strength of love triumphant over the seductive perils of materialism!"

"Look, Astin," I say, too harshly I'm sure for his sensitive



ears. "The only things in life we're guaranteed are Coca-Cola and air conditioning. Everything else, you gotta work for!"

"Well!" insists Chris, rushing to his defense. "At least Astin understands me!" And the two of them click their beer mugs, toasting their significant communication.

"I was only trying to be practical," I offer as explanation, trying to get back into the clubhouse.

"It's all right, Steve," Chris assures me, tapping my forearm with her hand. "I doubt I would've gotten the part, anyway. The tarot cards have said nothing about any future traveling."

"Did you tell your agent that?" I cynically inquire.

"No. Just that I was in love. Why confuse her?"

Why, indeed?

Well, Chris and Astin may have a clear understanding as to the unimportance of the practicalities of the capitalistic system, but she and I are still champs in other areas.

At least some of the time.

"Steve, that was fabulous!"

"Just terrific!"

"Absolutely incredible!"

"Like always!"

"I'm soaked with perspiration. Absolutely soaked."

"Me too."

"Boy, was that something! You know what?"

"What?"

"I had waves of multiple orgasms again. Waves of multiple orgasms!"

"That's my girl!"

"Steve?"

"What?"

"Can we do it again in a while?"

"I'd love to. But I don't know. I mean I'm really bushed."

"You don't want to?"

"Yes, I want to. I'm just not sure I'm able."

"Don't put me off. Yes or no?"

"Must we decide right now?"

"Yes!"

"All right. *No!*"

"Why?"

"I told you. It's three in the morning. That was a great collaboration. Now let's go to sleep, huh?"

Chris switches on her pained pout, complaining, "You don't find me sexually stimulating!"

"Right!" I laugh, confident she's got to be joking. "You may as well be mother superior of an abbey for all the sex appeal you generate!"

"Don't clown with me about something like this. You know how sensitive I am."

"I was only joking."

"You were serious."

"I was joking."

"You were not."

"Come on, how could you not see the humor? We've been rolling all over this bed for the past three hours getting into some of the most remarkably unique situations I bet even the most advanced illustrated guides have yet to come up with. We could add a new chapter to the *Kama Sutra*. Did you really think this crazed animal who's personally covered and ravaged every inch of that incredible monument you call your body could, in any conceivable way, possibly *not* be stimulated by you?"

"I've no idea."

"Well then, you'll just have to take my word for it."

"I don't."

"Chris, even Hugh Hefner would be exhausted by now."

"I wonder."

"Come on, you're easily one of the sexiest girls anywhere. It's impossible *not* to turn on to you. I've never known better sex. You must know that."

"That's all I am then? Just an object?"

I see there's no winning this one. "I will not allow you to turn this dumb, trivial issue into a fight, Chris. Is that clear? So let's just drop it and go to sleep, okay?"

"Is that it, Steve—you think sex is a trivial issue?"

"You know I didn't say that."

"No?"

"No! I was talking about how terrific you are. In bed or otherwise. It was *my* problem. I just wasn't sure *I* was up to tackling another set right now. But it's no big deal. I could get it up for you in a blizzard. I was just being foolishly, selfishly realistic, thinking since it's so late, we'd probably be smart to go to sleep soon so we might look like real people at eight thirty in the morning when we get up. That's all."

"I don't care about tomorrow morning. I'm interested in how I feel right *now!*"

"Fine. Talked me into it. Let's just relax for a few minutes, huh? I'll get another beer, maybe take a shower to freshen up, and we'll stay up all night and ball from the chandelier. Okay?"

"Under any other circumstances I'd happily say yes. But you make it seem like I'm twisting your arm. Forget it, Steve. I do not accept charity."

"Come on, Chris: *CHARITY!* You know, it's easy to interpret things just the way you want to hear them."

"And I do!"

"Don't I know!?"

Chris flops over on her belly. "Good night, Steve" she says with a thud.

Better throw in the towel on this one and start fresh in the morning. "Good night, Chris," I answer, very softly, grabbing a buttock with affection. "I love you."

"And I love you, Steve." . . . Pause. . . . Long beat. . . . "Even if you are a chauvinist pig who no longer finds me appealing."

"They love you!" says Rhonda, my commercial agent, calling the next day, letting me know I've been called back for the Pampers spot. "The casting lady loved you. Found you charming and witty and loved your reading and you're going to make me a very rich woman, Steve. You've got to get this one. Pampers, my dear, big-big residuals."

And three hours later I'm back at Benton & Bowles, repeating the audition Rhonda claimed they loved so well.

"Perfect!" applauds the director after the same actress playing my wife as last time and I finish the second taping. "Don't move! Stay right there! I want someone to see this!" And he is gone, bolting out the studio door, enthusiastically running down the hallway, waving his arms in the air, calling, "MARCIA! LARRY! COME SEE THIS! YOU'VE GOT TO COME SEE THIS!"

Returning two minutes later, followed by a man and a woman I assume to be Marcia and Larry, whoever they are, the director prods us excitedly saying, "Okay kids. I want you to do it again exactly as you just gave it to me. Don't change a thing. It was perfect!"

So my wife and I repeat our performance as the videotape machine turns on. I hand her a plastic wet baby; she hands me a real-life Pampers. I learn the facts of life and am eternally grateful.

"That's just plain marvelous!" says Marcia, slowly sinking into a chair, so moved is she apparently by our rendition. "Just what we're looking for!"

"Right on the button!" agrees Larry, who, probably stronger than Marcia, finds he can still stand even after experiencing such a theatrical phenomenon. "Put a Hold on both of them!"

Now that she's regained some of her stamina, Marcia finds she can stand again. Walking over to us, she slams her fist on the table housing the plastic Pampered baby and, like Eisenhower addressing the troops, says firmly, "That's what I call good work!" Then, turning on her heels, she marches out of the studio, followed directly by Larry.

"You're going to have to marry me, Steve!" says a very happy Rhonda, calling the following morning. "They want you back! Loved you, not so sure about her! So they're teaming you up with a new girl, just to make it letter-perfect. You're going to get this one, Steve. I know it."

And so, there I am, back at the studio that afternoon, for another reading, this time with my new wife, giving my all for Pampers.

I'll try not to bore you with the plaudits lauded upon us after the taping. I doubt, though, Callas' return to the opera house in Milan reaped as much enthusiasm.

I arrive home in splendid spirits, positive I've nailed the job, and tell Chris how very well it all went.

"That's *so* exciting!" she bubbles.

"I know. Anyone call yet?"

"I . . . wouldn't know. Just got in a few minutes ago myself."

"I'll call my service. Maybe they've heard something."

"Good idea," says Chris kind of quietly, walking into the kitchen.

"0900!" chirps my answering service lady, with what sounds like at least half a sandwich in her mouth.

"Hi! This is Steve Butler. Any messages?"

"Hi, Steve. Nope. I already told you. Nothing yet." Munch. Munch. "Are you home?"

"Yes."

"Well, your Miss Canaday checked in not five minutes ago, saying she was at your house, calling in for you." Munch.

"Oh?"

"Didn't she tell you nothing's come in yet?"

"Um . . . of course she told me. I'm just expecting an important call and wanted to make sure myself."

"Nope. Nothing yet." Munch. Munch. Munch.

"Okay, thanks."

"Yeah. Miss Canaday's been picking up your messages for weeks now. Sounds like a lovely girl. You must be very happy."

"Thrilled," I say.

"See ya!" Munch. Munch.

"Thank you."

Click.

I walk into the kitchen, where Chris is busy creating some strange health salad.

"Why didn't you tell me you already called my service?"



"You want to know the truth, Steve? I'm not at all sure yogurt and carrot strips mix so well together. But Astin says even the recipe claims it's more a salad for the eye than the palette."

"I asked you a question."

"About the service?"

"Yes."

"Oh, what's the big deal?"

"I don't know. What is the big deal?"

"Nothing. I called, and they said you had no messages."

"Why didn't you tell me you'd already called?"

"I don't know."

"They said you've been checking after my messages for a month."

"Not that long."

"What's the difference how long, Chris? The point is you've been getting my messages."

"So?"

"What do you mean, 'So'? You don't see *me* calling your service for *your* messages, do you?"

"Why would you want to?"

"Well, just what is it about *my* messages that make them so fascinating?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm just interested in keeping up with your career."

"There is nothing, Chris, going on in my career, that you don't know."

"That's not true. You get messages you don't always talk about."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Petty things. An audition. A callback. A friend here and there."

"All right, I don't like any of this. Not only do you call in for my messages, but you do it sneakily, not even telling me you're doing it, which makes it worse."

"I thought if I told you you'd tell me to stop."

"Damn right!"

"That's why I didn't tell you!"

"Fine. And now I've found out. SO STOP!"

"You really are an ingrate. There'll be no yogurt-carrot salad for you!"

"For which I can only be grateful!"

"It just so happens if I go out of my way, wondering what's going on in your life and if I happen to call your service to learn who's leaving you messages and if it makes me somewhat secure being more in touch with you vis-à-vis those trying to reach you . . . is that such a goddamned crime?"

Since I can think of no sensible rejoinder to penetrate such reasoning, I say nothing. Chris continues, "I can't believe you could actually make such a big deal out of an issue as minor and insignificant as this! The trouble with you, Steve, is you spend so much of your time worrying about trivialities you've never learned how to celebrate life!"

"Chris, calm down, huh?"

"Now generosity is taken for contempt!" she crows, turning on her heels, stomping out of the kitchen.

While I'm deciding what she could possibly have meant by that and whether or not she wants me to follow her, the phone rings.

"*Congratulations!*" beams Rhonda over the wires. "*You got the Pampers job!*"

"NO!"

"I knew this one was going to work. They *LOVED* you. Okay. I've got a Hold on you to shoot for Friday. They need you tomorrow for a fitting. I've got a million things to do. I'll call later with the rest of the details."

"Thanks, Rhonda."

"Don't thank me, Steve. We're going to get rich together!" Click.

Hurrying into the bedroom to spread the good word, I hear the shower running in the bathroom. So I stick my head in the door and, deciding to postpone the announcement, yell, "I'm going out for a while . . . have to pick up a few things!"

"Do what you want," she yells back, still apparently miffed.

All right. If that's the way she wants to play the game . . . she's on!

I leave the apartment and do a bit of shopping. Now nouveau-riche, I can almost afford the half pound of fresh caviar and the dozen red long-stemmed roses and the bottle of Dom Pérignon '66 and the fifty-dollar size bottle of Shalimar, the kid's favorite fragrance. I'll show her who knows how to celebrate life!

"I'm overwhelmed!" exclaims Chris, once presented with her gifts. "It's just like Christmas!"

"Well, we never really did have much of a Christmas this year, so I figured why not go all out, huh?"

"What an exciting occasion! But I feel terrible. I haven't done anything nice for you in hours!"

"Quite all right, Chris. You give plenty. Don't worry."

Chris throws her arms around me, and we kiss and kiss, and I can feel the cloud of tension from our earlier collision drifting out to sea.

"Why are you so good to me, Steve? I'm so crazy."

"That's half the fun."

"I bet you're growing a little impatient, huh?"

"Nope."

"Come on. Even when I do dumb things?"

"Nope."

"I wouldn't blame you. I'd go crazy if someone did to me what I do to you."

"No, you wouldn't. Not if you loved them."

"And you love me?"

"Yes. Chris. Very, very much!"

And so, as we sit down in front of the fireplace, spreading before us the extravagant goodies I've brought home, preparing to launch into celebration, it's clear once again, the SS *Lollipop* is in full sail.

Until the telephone rings!

And it is Rhonda, calling back to say I won't believe this, talk about surprise endings, but fact is though the Benton & Bowles people loved-me-loved-me-loved-me, and it was all mine as far as they were concerned, the client wasn't quite as strung out and opted to go instead with someone more Apple-Pie-All-American, so the Pampers spot isn't mine,

after all, sorry 'bout that, though it sure was a close one and look at it this way: It wasn't a total loss 'cause the folks at Benton & Bowles really *LOVE* me now—so hang in there, honey, I'll make a rich lady of her yet!

Crash!

Soaring to the heights, convinced something's in the bag one minute, then plummeting to the pits the next, as it's taken away, is an extraordinary energy sapper, rendering me down and morose.

Chris does her best to cheer me up, which is most considerate, but I'm only up for sulking and explain I just need some time to get over this disappointment. But Chris thinks that's silly. She feels since we're having a picnic in front of the fireplace that I should cheer up immediately. She reasons if things are running smoothly with US, what other complaints could I possibly harbor of any consequence?

"Chris, that spot meant a lot to me!"

"You mean your career is more important than me?" she concludes.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"It is!"

"It isn't. They are two separate things!"

"Then cheer up!"

"I can't just cheer up on cue. I'd love to be happy. But I feel lousy. I've just spent a fortune of money I haven't even got. Can't you allow me the privilege of one small brood? I promise to keep it down to a very few hours. I've quite a low self-indulgence threshold."

"Let's make love. That'll cheer you up."

"I'll cheer up in time. If you'll just leave me alone."

"Oh, so now I'm bothering you?"

"That's not what I meant."

"It's what you said, though."

"Chris, I'm warning you, this is no time to start a fight. I'm really in an ill temper. Let's both be careful, huh?"

"Threatening me, huh?"

"Do you want another glass of champagne?"

"Don't change the subject."

"What was the subject?"

"Do you want to make love?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm not in the mood."

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"I want to hear you say it."

"All right. I'm in a lousy mood because I didn't get the Pampers commercial. I'm so mad at those diaper people I may join planned parenthood! And so I do not feel like making love at this time."

"I take that as a personal rejection!"

"You do and I'll break your arm!"

Chris rushes to the window, opens it and yells into the empty courtyard, "VIOLENCE! VIOLENCE! WOMAN BEATER IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD!"

"That's very clever, Chris. Now would you mind closing the window and coming inside?"

"*HELP! A MAN IS THREATENING TO BREAK MY ARM! THERE'S A MAD WOMAN-BEATER STALKING THE BUILDING!*"

"Chris, if someone calls the police, I'm going to let you do all the explaining."

"*STOP HIM BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!*"

Walking over, I calmly pull Chris away from the window before closing it. "Chris, you're going to get us into trouble!"

"Don't be silly. This is Manhattan. Who gives a shit?"

"I do, and I'm getting a headache!"

"I don't care. Let's make love!"

"Let's not."

"I tried to cheer you up!"

"It didn't work!"

"That's not my fault!"

"Nor mine."

"Well, what do you want from me?"

"Nothing, Chris. What do you want from me?"

"A kiss!"



"A kiss?"

"A kiss."

"One kiss?"

"One kiss!"

"One kiss and you'll leave me alone?"

"Probably forever!"

"You're on!"

Chris practically jumps at me, crash-landing her lips on mine. We kiss for some time, and I must confess I'm just starting to get interested, thinking maybe she's right, forget-your-troubles-come-on-get-happy, perhaps a good, solid jog around the mattress is just what the doctor ordered, when there is the most alarming knocking and banging on the door.

"Who's that?" asks Chris in terror.

"Probably the Gestapo!"

"You think?"

"Or maybe the little white men with the big-big net. They've come for you at last!"

Chris goes to the door and opening it, welcomes in Marie, my bouncy downstairs neighbor, who heard all the screaming in the courtyard, figured there was some wild bash going on up here and decided to crash the party.

So the three of us sit down to finish the champagne and caviar, Marie being far more indulgent with the expensive offerings than even bad breeding would allow.

And I must confess that watching Marie bubbling about, scooping up all that black gold and guzzling down all that liquid money, really drives me deeper into despair over not being able to either afford, enjoy or get enough of it.

So, later on, when Marie returns downstairs to her apartment, bloated and blissful, I'm in far worse a mood than earlier and again still not interested in making love.

Which drives Chris up the wall all over again, as she pulls out from the closet all her paranoia and insecurities, accusing me of being disinterested, disenchanted and disgusting.

I'm too upset to fight or talk her out of it though, so I retaliate by taking a sleeping pill and calling it a very bad day.

The following morning I'm in the bathroom, shaving, when Chris calls me into the living room. Drying my face, I walk in and find her curled up in my large corduroy chair, engrossed in the *Times*.

"Hey!" she greets me. "They had eight inches of new spring snow last night in Vermont. Maybe we could get up there soon for a long weekend."

"I'd love it."

"What time is your audition?"

"I'm almost late now."

"You'd better hurry. I need the bathroom once you're finished. I've got less than an hour to get to my call."

"I'll be done in a minute."

"Hey!" She whistles, struck with inspiration. "Will you meet me for lunch today? I'm free from twelve to one."

"I don't think I can. I'll be down in the Village all day. Won't you be uptown?"

"So?"

"Makes it a little difficult. I won't get out of my first interview until after twelve. By the time I'd get uptown we'd have less than half an hour."

"Plenty of time."

"Come on, Chris. I've got to be back in the Village again this afternoon. Does it make sense to travel all the way uptown for twenty minutes before turning around and going back?"

"Only if you cared."

"Don't give me that. You know I care."

"How do I know? You won't take a fast subway ride to meet me."

"Tell you what; why don't you come *downtown* and meet me in the Village for lunch?"

"For half an hour?"

"Right."

"Doesn't pay."

Well, that ends that discussion.

"By the by," says Chris, changing the subject. "Astin saw *Another Straw* last night at the Plaza."

"And?"

"And he hated it. Found it absolutely distasteful and abominable." And, saying so quite definitely, Chris darts back to her paper before immediately looking up again and, switching on the most enigmatic of expressions, questions, "Or was it that he was completely enchanted and totally adored it? Oh, well, I can't remember how he felt—does it really matter?—but he was most vehement!"

"That's clear," I say, thinking it's anything but.

"They're only keeping it open another couple of weeks. Apparently business isn't good."

"That's no surprise."

"One other thing," shifts Chris, not looking up from the weather page. "Astin asked if I would be his escort to a party Saturday night. He needs a date, and there's no one else he can ask. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not!" I say, shrugging casually, turning back to the bathroom to finish washing so I can get out of the house as fast as possible before she senses how very much I really do mind.

I race around the Village most of the day, tending to, among other things, my two auditions, neither of which proves to be any milestone makers. When I return to the apartment around four in the afternoon, I find Chris still curled up in my corduroy chair, the *Times* still unfolded in front of her, still in the same bathrobe, the tarot cards spread all over the floor in front of her, a small box of Kleenex resting snugly between her legs.

"How are you?" I ask, approaching her.

"Worse than yesterday. Not as bad as tomorrow," is her smug but glum answer.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"This is the way I left you."

"I know."

"What happened to your audition?"

"I didn't go."

"How come?"

"Why bother?"

"Not good, Chris. A no-name actress has no choice. That's why you bother. If your agent finds out you're not showing up, she'll stop sending you around."

"It's not that I didn't want to go. I tried. Just couldn't get it together."

"You feeling depressed about something?"

"You know, if your career should take a sudden dip for the worse, you can always find work as a psychic."

"What's wrong?"

"I sure as hell wish I knew."

"No ideas?"

"None. I've been sitting here all day crying. And I swear I don't know why. Every time I tried getting up I just started crying all over again."

"I'm sorry."

"I even read my tarot cards, figuring it might tell me why I was so upset."

"And?"

"And look at that reading. Have you ever seen so many daggers?"

I kneel down in front of the chair and hug her tightly.

"Well, Carmen, we'll just have to cheer you up, that's all."

"No, thanks. I'm too tired. I think I'll take a nap."

"All right. I'll join you."

So we go into the bedroom to lie down for a couple of hours. From time to time, I reach over and try to get affectionate, but Chris is just not in the mood. She nudges away from my attentions, turning over, farther away from me.

Several hours later the benevolent side of the Three Faces of Eve awakens, and Chris is suddenly no longer distraught. Without even mentioning what went on earlier this afternoon, we kiss and kiss, winding up spending the better part of the next hour or so promising total commitments to each other forever and ever.

Afterward, still ebullient and spirited, we go to Ruskay's, the neighborhood candlelit romantic spot.

We're so attached to each other, we keep our fingers

clasped together throughout the dinner (ever try cutting your meat with one hand?) and play all sorts of footsie-leg entanglement games beneath the table.

We arrive home a little after midnight. I undress, go into the bathroom and wash. As I walk back into the bedroom, I find Chris sitting on the edge of the bed, casually removing and examining the contents of my trousers.

"Chris . . . what are you doing?"

"Emptying your pants."

"You're going through my pockets!"

"No. I'm just looking. I always do. I get small clues to the kind of day you had, what you've been doing when I wasn't with you."

"When you weren't with me?"

"Yeah. When we're not together."

"But, Chris, that's my personal property."

"Don't be silly," she dismisses. "Some loose change. A wrinkled Kleenex. Big deal. Nothing between us is *private*, is it? Please feel free to look through any of my things if you wish."

"I do not wish."

"My stuff isn't as much fun as yours anyway. Take this laundry ticket, for instance."

"Why?"

"Well, I didn't even know you used these cleaners. I thought you preferred the Chinese guy up the block."

"It wasn't a matter of preference. It was convenience. I was late, so I just dropped my shirts off at the closest place."

"Now I know!"

"Now you know what?"

"How you feel about laundries."

"Chris, if you want to know how I feel about laundries, ask. I promise to give you an unqualified dissertation. But don't go through my pockets, okay?"

"Why not, if it gives me pleasure?"

"Because they're mine! Just like the messages on my service!"

"What are you trying to hide?"

"Everything, kid. Especially the three mistresses I'm



keeping in separate apartments on Sutton Place. I don't want you finding their love letters."

"Don't make light of this!"

"No, Chris. Don't make heavy of this. Period." Walking over to her with determination, I practically pull the pants out of her hands. As I walk to the closet to hang them up, I continue, "It has nothing to do with you. I just don't want anyone going through my pockets. Now you know. Don't blow it up or interpret it to mean anything else like how it affects the way I feel for you. They are unrelated matters. Got it? I love you, Chris. Both in spite of and because of your phenomenal gift for spontaneity, irrationality and surprise. Understand?"

Chris looks up at me, the wounded puppy. In no way does she understand. "Well, no matter," I continue, much more subdued. "Now that I've vented my spleen all over your head, I feel much better. I'm going to sleep. See you in bed!"

Like ships in the night, Chris and I pass without speaking: me to the bed, she to the bathroom. To cry.

And so, as I lie awake listening to the sniffles and quiet sobs emanating from behind the closed bathroom door, I carefully plot ways to bring her out of this. But I can't. I'm enervated and spent. So I fall asleep.

Some time later—twenty minutes, an hour, two?—I'm aware of a body crawling under the covers, far from next to me. I know it's Chris because I'd recognize those sniffles anywhere.

"Feel better?" I ask the stranger on the other side of the bed.

"I want you to make love to me," answers Chris, mid-sniffle.

"I don't feel like it," I tell her quite honestly.

"I don't care."

"Chris. I can't perform on command. I'm a bit upset about what's been going on, and I just don't feel particularly passionate right now. Try to see it from my side for once. Besides, we did it before going out for dinner, remember."

"That was a long time ago."

"Listen. If our sex drives aren't the same, it doesn't mean I care less. Just that you can do it more frequently. Nothing else. And I'm really tired. So good night." Leaning over, I try to get to her face for a kiss, but Chris turns her cheek on me. "You're a very difficult woman!" I say, turning over on my stomach. Closing my eyes, my only hope is oblivion won't be far away.

And as the first waves of semisleep begin clouding over my consciousness, just as I'm starting to drift off again, I hear Chris asking out loud, most rhetorically, "*There's someone else, isn't there?*"

The next morning, Saturday, I get up early and get into the kitchen to prepare a huge breakfast for the two of us. Bringing it into the bedroom on a tray, I wake Sleeping Beauty, most anxious to see what today's Response to Life is going to be. And my barometer registers Four Stars. Terrific. The kid's in splendid spirits: warm, adoring, sparkling with enthusiasm.

And the entire day goes wonderfully well. It's beautiful and sunny and surprisingly mild for the middle of March, and we go for a lazy walk in Central Park and then stop off for lunch at one of those Fifty-seventh Street all-omelet places and then take in a movie on the East Side.

Afterward, on the way home, Chris suggests we stop off at Baskin-Robbins for a late afternoon *dolce*, a slight fat attack to cap the day.

"I'm not sure, Chris. I've still got that mushroom omelet swimming laps in my stomach from lunch."

"Nonsense," dismisses Chris. "A solid ice-cream cone is just what you need to wash it all down. Besides, you've got to get a cone of your own; else I won't have another flavor to taste."

"Why don't you just get a double scoop?"

"I plan to. I was talking about sharing a third flavor."

"I see."

"Come on, Steve. Don't be a party pooper. Celebrate life!"

"You dare me to celebrate life?"

"Double dare you!"

"You're on!"

And so, stalwart and eager, we taxi over to the crowded West Side Baskin-Robbins, pick a number and wait our turn.

Chris spends the next few minutes carefully pacing up and down the counter, peering down into the various ice-cream cartons, ruminating over which flavors to vie for.

"I can't make up my mind," she says quite seriously, coming over to me. "What about you?"

"I was thinking about English Toffee."

"*English Toffee?*" repeats Chris distastefully, as if I'd just suggested pouring ketchup all over my breakfast cereal. "That's an old lady's flavor!"

"Says who?"

"It's so Howard Johnson, so conservative. No zip. No pizzazz. Can't you be a little more extravagant? A bit more *bon vivant*?"

"All right. Tell me how."

"Remember, Steve, I'm liable to devour at least a third of whatever you decide to order, so your decision is most critical."

"Okay."

"So go with something a little more adventurous."

"Like what?"

"Something with a bit more flair than humdrum toffee."

"Fine. Like what?"

"Something with a bit of ambiance to it. Something with that certain *je ne sais quoi* . . . a flavor that bespeaks of that unmistakable mark of cultured refinement and dignified air of good taste."

"Great. I'll take it."

"A flavor that separates common ice-cream gorgers from sophisticated, delicately paletted ice-cream lovers. A flavor which instantly conveys to the man behind the counter that you're a discerning gentleman who knows his pints and quarts!"

"Terrific! What do I order?"

"Bubble Gum!"

"Perfect, Chris! I don't know why I didn't think of that myself." And, turning to the harried fellow behind the counter, I carefully order, "One English Toffee cone, please."

"*Traitor!*" yells Chris, bringing the back of her hand up to her forehead, preparing to faint. "*Pearls before swine!* Why do I go on, day after day, trying to bring culture to this heathen? Did I study all those years at the Sorbonne, working toward my doctorate in Ice Cream Flavors in vain?"

"Chris. The man is waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"To take your order."

"Okay, hotshot. Watch this!" Turning to the bemused fellow behind the counter, Chris goes into her veddy British, veddy nasal Margaret Rutherford, ordering, "I should like a double cone, if you'd be so kind, young man, combining the following *flavors*: Blueberry Marshmallow and Peanut Butter 'n' Chocolate!" Then, turning to me in triumph, Chris inquires, "Now! How about that?"

"What can I say? Taste will out!"

Chris' double scooper is handed to her, I pay the man and we leave. Just as we get outside the store, though, Chris brings her tall cone to her nose, complaining, "*Yeccch!* Oh my God! How awful!"

"What?"

"Something's wrong. Smell yours."

So I smell my ice cream, and as I do, Chris pushes it smack into my face.

And as I stand there in the middle of Broadway and Seventy-first Street, finding it difficult to believe I've just fallen for perhaps the oldest trick in the books, as English Toffee drips down my nose and dribbles onto my jacket, Chris looks at me and says, "Now aren't you sorry you didn't order Bubble Gum?"

And the race is on!

I chase her up Seventy-first Street, across Columbus Av-

venue, and just as I'm about to catch her, preparing to rinse her hair in a Blueberry Marshmallow-Peanut Butter 'n' Chocolate rinse, she trips and falls, bruising and scraping her knee, while her cone goes flying into the gutter.

I rush over, bending down to help. Hugging her, I ask, "You hurt?"

"Of course I'm hurt! You think I'm elastic?"

"Poor baby!"

"I hope you're covered for this, Steve. The lawsuit's going to be a dilly!"

"Let me kiss the boo-boo."

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's covered in blood."

"Perfect. I have it on very good authority Blood is the next Flavor of the Month."

"My knee hurts."

"I know. I'm sorry. What can I do?"

"Carry me."

"Carry you?"

"Yes."

"Home?"

"No. Not home."

"Where then?"

"Back to the ice-cream store."

"Anything you say." I lift Chris, carrying her down Columbus Avenue, back toward Baskin-Robbins, the way Clark Gable carried Vivien Leigh up the stairs.

"Steve?" asks Chris, twirling my hair and wiping the ice cream off my face.

"Yes?"

"Would you do me a favor now that I'm a patient?"

"Anything!"

"This time out would you choose Bubble Gum?"

"Gladly!" I say, kissing her on the lips with my toffee-stained mouth.

We return to the apartment around eight and after I play Dr. Kildare, tending to the small cut on Chris' knee,



she kisses me and then hurries to change, since this is the night she's accompanying Astin to that party he's asked her to.

Astin comes calling for her about half an hour later, decked out in a snappy, though bizarre, all-off-white suit-shirt-tie-shoes combo. He's even dyed his mustache off-white for the occasion. And, if memory serves, his whole ensemble appears to be of the same off-white as the paintings he displayed in his apartment.

The two of us awkwardly sit there while his date continues getting ready in the other room. And while drumming up light chatter, I feel very much like a father whose daughter's having her first prom, saddling me with the inestimable pleasure of entertaining her gentleman caller while she hurries about with last-minute preparations.

At last the bedroom door swings open, and a very radiant Chris, in a blue-and-white polka-dotted pleated dress and a matching blue-and-white polka-dotted Band-Aid on her knee, dances into the room, very Loretta Young, announcing gaily, "I'm ready for the ball!"

And so, off go Cinderella and Prince Charming, skipping out the door, on their merry way, leaving me and the mice and the bulldogs alone to fend for ourselves.

I spend the evening with a couple of old movies on the tube and go to sleep somewhere around one. Chris arrives home around six in the morning and, after undressing, nudges into bed next to me.

"Have a good time?" I ask, more asleep than awake.

"It was okay." Chris sighs just before falling asleep herself.

Late the following afternoon, after a very lazy Sunday hanging around the house, while Chris is downstairs visiting Marie, the telephone rings.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Steve?"

"Yes?"

"Hi!" says a very chummy voice on the other end. "It's Bradley!"

Did he say Bradley? "Who?" I ask.

"Brad. Bradley Forrester! How are you?"

"Fine thanks. How are you?" I offer, like I almost cared, busy trying to think what could possibly have prompted his calling.

"Can't complain."

That's a relief. "Good."

"Chris home?"

This is a very confusing conversation. "Chris?"

"Yeah. Chris."

"Oh. No. Sorry." Why am I apologizing? "She's downstairs visiting a neighbor."

"Okay. Will you tell her she left her wallet at my place last night?"

Wait a minute! Will I tell her what?

"You there, Steve?"

"Huh?"

"Are-you-there?"

"Yes. Yes. Right here. Yes. I'll . . . I'll tell her that."

"Thanks a lot. Tell her I'll bring it to the bar tonight. She can pick it up there if she likes. Will you give her the message?"

"Oh, I'll give her the message!"

"Thanks a lot, old buddy. See you soon, huh?"

"Sure, sure, Bradley. Whatever you say."

As I hang up the phone, Chris walks into the apartment. I'm still in such a state of confusion I haven't even had time to consider what any of all this might mean so, ever the faithful courier, I deliver the message.

"Bradley just called," I say, calm and matter-of-fact.

"WHAT?" asks Chris, more taken by my dim tone I'm sure than anything else.

"You left your wallet."

Chris looks at me.

I look back at her.

She says nothing.

I say nothing.

At last she screws up her face and, in a slightly sharp and insistent tone, sighs, "I suppose you want an explanation!"

"No. I'm not sure that I do."

"Or an apology?"

"It's not necessary."

"You're not interested in what happened?"

"I didn't say I wasn't interested, Chris. I said you owe me no explanation."

"It doesn't bother you that I was with someone else last night!"

"Doesn't it?"

"How would I know? Look how you're acting."

"How am I acting?"

"You don't seem affected by it at all."

"How do you know that?"

"You're so calm."

"So?"

"So nothing. I suppose if it bothered you, you might show some reaction."

"Is that what you want—some reaction?"

"Is that what *I* want?"

"Yeah, Chris. Is that what you want? You've got to tell me these things, kiddo. I can't get through to that warped brain if I don't know what you're expecting. Tell you what! Why don't you just lay out the scene as you'd like it and I promise to play the teeth off it. You want me blowing up in a fit of jealous rage? I will! You want me comforting and understanding? You got it! You want me pained and wounded? Fine, I'll be pained and wounded! Just tell me what part I should take, and I promise we'll play the scene however you wish. What's your pleasure?"

"I don't like your attitude!"

"What makes you think I'm so fond of yours?"

"Why are you acting like this?"

"Like what? I told you. I don't understand either the motivation or the subtext of the scene. I'm waiting for you to explain it. Then I'll know how to react. But it's your show."

You gotta call the shots. 'Cause honest to shit, Chris, especially after that great day we had together yesterday, I've no idea what the fuck's going on."

"There's not really much to it."

"No."

"No. Actually, it was all kind of innocent."

"I'd be most interested to hear how."

"Well, the party ended around two, and neither Astin nor I was tired yet. We figured you were asleep and didn't want to wake you, so we decided to go for a nightcap."

"To the Blue Owl?"

"Right. Which we did, and as it turns out, Bradley was working last night and was very glad to see us, being most attentive, and as chance would have it, his wife was out of town on business and so he asked me back to his place after he got off work, you know, just for old times' sake. Honest, Steve. It was no big deal!"

"I'm sure it was no big deal, Chris."

"I mean I didn't even enjoy it. Thought of *you* the whole time."

"I'm honored!"

"It's true, damn it! He means nothing to me!"

"I'm sure."

"I don't like you when you're smug. Christ, it was just a lark."

"To hurt me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"How should I know?"

"You've got to, Chris. You're the one writing the goddamn script!"

"What can I tell you?"

"You can tell me one small thing."

"What's that?"

"Why?"

"Why'd I do it?"

"No. Not why you did it. Though we'll try to get back to that. More immediate, I want to know why you felt it so essential I find out about it."

"That's not true."

"NO? How come he called here so casually?"

"I told him I'd moved in with you, of course."

"But not that we'd become lovers?"

"No."

"So he still thinks we're just friends! Why didn't you tell him the truth?"

"Too complicated. We were only together a few hours."

"That's my point."

"I don't understand."

"Chris, you raving troublemaker. You're as subtle as a cyclone. Don't you see? First you let him think it's perfectly all right to call here should he have the need to. Then you create the need, fucking your way to the bottom, leaving your wallet at his place, so of course he calls. Which all means, dummy, you thought it more important that I *find out* what you did behind my back than what you were actually doing behind my back! And if that's too obscure for you, it all comes down to your wanting to hurt me. AND I DON'T LIKE TO BE HURT, UNDERSTAND? PARTICULARLY BY MAD WOMEN WHOM, FOR REASONS I OFTEN HAVE GREAT DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING, I HAPPEN TO HAVE THE MISFORTUNE OF BEING IN LOVE WITH! AND I DON'T CARE HOW FUCKING NEUROTIC YOU GET, SHIT-HEAD, I THINK HURTING SOMEONE YOU LOVE IS AS DUMB AND SELFISH AND DOWNRIGHT DESTRUCTIVE AS ANYONE CAN GET AND YOU CAN JUST GO TO HELL IF YOU PLAN TO SPEND MUCH MORE OF YOUR TIME DOING THINGS LIKE THIS AGAIN. I DON'T MIND YOUR BEING CRAZY CHRIS, BUT DON'T DRIVE ME OVER THE CLIFF WITH YOU BECAUSE ONE OF US SHOULD STAY AWAKE AND SINCE YOU'RE ALWAYS OFF IN DISNEYLAND, I GUESS IT HAS TO BE ME!"

Hurrying over to her constant companion, the box of tissues on the windowsill, Chris sobs. "Oh, Steve! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! It was such a stupid thing to do. So dumb. But



... I don't know ... I love you so much and you upset me so terribly sometimes, I think I'm losing you. I guess I was just lashing out the only way I know how."

"But what'd I do that was so awful?"

"What?"

"What'd I do to get you so upset?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, what'd I do to make you want to hurt me so?"

"I really don't know."

"Don't you?"

"Well ... I guess I just wanted to prove there are men around who still find me sexually attractive."

Taking a very deep breath, I slump down onto the couch. "You, my dear Chris, are the most tiring person I've ever tried to keep up with. If I could only find a handle on you."

Chris hurries over to me, taking hold of my hands. "Oh, Steve, my darling. Will you forgive me? Will you ever forgive me?"

I look at her very, very serious, saying, "Only if that's what you want."

"How should I know what I want, Steve?"

"Sad but true."

"How nice you understand me so well," she says, blowing her nose.

"Sad but true."

"And I love you for it."

"And I love you, Chris. They're going to have to give us a double room at Happydale for our mutual breakdowns, but I'm at least gonna go down fighting."

"Sad but true." Chris sighs in agreement, coming still closer, tentatively sliding her arms around my neck before squeezing me tightly in what turns out to be, all things considered, a surprisingly affectionate embrace.

The following morning, after breakfast, Chris runs out of the apartment for several audition appointments, naturally already late.

Returning several hours later, we rush to each other,

embracing like prisoners of war reuniting with their loved ones.

"Well, I did it!" exclaims Chris, in perhaps the happiest tone I've heard all month.

"What's that?" I ask, excitedly returning her enthusiasm.

"Called Mr. Taylor, my landlord, and gave him thirty-day notice on my apartment!"

Stung and disbelieving, I stare at Chris and dumb-foundedly say, "I don't understand."

"I'm giving up my apartment!" she repeats.

"Why, Chris? Why did you do that?" I ask, suddenly burning up inside.

My cover must be fairly well masquerading my dismay. Chris still bubbles. "I don't know. Sort of a spur-of-the-moment inspiration, I guess. It suddenly dawned upon me how foolish we are to be paying two rents. That's all. Isn't it super?"

"Why wasn't I consulted?" I ask, sober as possible, though still seething within.

"I thought you'd be thrilled!"

"That has nothing to do with it! Of course, I think it's a fabulous idea to live together. But not yet. In time. We're having too many problems now for that. Don't you see how your going off and doing something like this, without talking to me first, is just looking for more trouble?"

"I thought you'd jump for joy, you bastard."

Something, somewhere smack between my lungs, is starting to burn. Like a slow-mounting explosion, I feel the hostility building up, on its way out. I try pushing it down, practically gritting my teeth to keep it there.

"You know, Chris. This whole thing is progressive. It just keeps growing. I'm spending so much goddamned time being on guard, watching you, getting you out of trouble or waiting to have to defend myself against absurd accusations, I've none left to be me. Well, you want to know something? I'm tired of being the Mr. Goody-two-shoes Hall Patrol Monitor. I'm sick of not being able to step out of line. Tell you what? Let's switch roles. I'll be Dennis the

Menace for a while. Let's see how much you enjoy being Chief of Police!"

"You hate me!"

"Chris, I promise if you so much as dare fall back on that bullshit line again, I'm going to slam you against the wall!"

Slumping down into the corduroy chair, Chris asks, straight and honest, "What should I do?"

"I'm asking you to look at what's going on, look at what you're doing. All this neurotic sabotaging. Didn't any of your analysis teach you anything?"

"Come on, Steve. The only thing I learned in analysis was how to cross my legs like a lady while lying on a couch. Don't you see? I gave up my place to show how secure I finally am about us. To show you that thing with Bradley Saturday night meant nothing. I wanted you to be confident *we're* all that matters."

"Confident, my ass! Confident until your next caper. Things started so well this morning. You got up on the right side of the bed. I guess it was just too much to expect you to stay in that mood all day. As always, you had to sink the boat!" Whatever that internal explosion is, it's not going away. In fact, the more heated I get, the more it builds, burning a hole now in my stomach. "Just what exactly is going on in that crowded mind of yours, Chris? Just what are you thinking? Tell me. Tell me so I can help."

Chris looks down, staring straight at the floor. Neither of us speaks for a long, long while, and the only sound is the quieting of my very heavy breathing.

At last Chris looks up at me. "You think I'm headed for a mini-breakdown, don't you?" she asks very softly.

"I don't know what you're heading toward, Chris. But I sure wish you'd let me in on it."

"Admit it, Steve. Tell me. You can. I'll understand. You're sorry we started this. Sorry we ever got this involved, huh?"

And I guess that's it. The festering explosion gushes from within, up through my throat, and out it cracks.

"THERE, CHRIS! YOU DID IT! YOU FINALLY DID IT! YOU WILL SIMPLY NOT UNDERSTAND ME! WELL, IT HAPPENED. IT TOOK WEEKS OF WORK BUT IT HAPPENED. IT FINALLY HAPPENED. SNAP. JUST LIKE THAT. THE LAST STRAW AND NOW THE GODDAMN CEILING JUST CAVED IN. YOU'VE MANAGED TO MAKE ME CONFUSED AND EXHAUSTED AND FURIOUS AND DISGUSTED AND HOSTILE AND MISERABLE AND NERVOUS AND IRRATIONAL AND ANGRY AND NOW TO TOP IT ALL OFF—AND I'VE GOT TO HAND IT TO YOU CAUSE AT LONG LAST YOU DID IT, CHRIS—I'M NOW THOROUGHLY RIGHT UP THERE WITH YOU—*YOU FINALLY GOT ME DEPRESSED!*"

Chris looks down at the floor again. "I'm sorry," she mutters sadly.

"YOU'RE SORRY? TERRIFIC! BUT NOW WHO'S GOING TO CHEER *ME* UP? *YOU*? MISS MEDEA?"

Chris stands and walks slowly to the bedroom doorway. "I'm sorry you're depressed, Steve. Very, very sorry." Then, as she walks into the room, closing the door behind her, she delivers her final Sunday punch, ending the match in a TKO, adding, "But don't blame me. Just remember . . . I was the one who warned you it would happen."

## Chapter Thirteen

Why is it the Forces That Be (Mother and Father Nature) insist on keeping us forever dangling between alternating levels of failure and success in both our love lives and professional endeavors?

Do they refuse us happiness in both areas at once since such might be construed as heaven before our time and simply not in the nature of things?

I wonder.

Tossing around within the confines of MY corner of the bed, weighing the validity of this theory, I reason since things with Chris have suddenly grown so stormy and confusing, I can probably count on my career's jumping forward with alacrity some time in the near future.

Switching on a bit of wish fulfillment and ESP, I see myself landing that coveted role of Alfred in *March into April* at last.

Proving my theory correct and reinforcing my clairvoyance, Pat calls the following morning.

"Hello?"

"Good news. Good news. Good news!"

"Hi, Pat."

"Wait till you hear this, Steve. Are your people working for you, or not?"

"What's up?" I ask, trying hard not to get too excited.

"Call Mike Douglas and set the deal yourself, Joan! Do I look like somebody's lackey? Figure it out, then let me see



the figures. And call Allan Carr and find out about George Maharis' availability! Now, Steve . . . where were we?"

"You had good news."

"Right! Well, one of our clients, Cam Savage, has been doing *Barefoot in the Park* in winter stock at one of the Kenley theaters in Ohio. But he's come down with a bad case of hepatitis, and since they didn't take the trouble to hire an understudy, they're *desperate* for someone who's done the part before and can step in practically *immediately*. We had a meeting here this morning, and I convinced everyone to give you a shot at it. Fifteen hundred big ones for the two weeks remaining in the run. How 'bout that?"

"Sounds terrific," I say, only slightly disappointed.

"You bet! Okay, now the first thing we must. . . . What? I don't know any Leonard! . . . Who? . . . Oh, *that* Leonard! Right! Isn't he the producer with the limp? Yeah, I'll take it. . . . Steve, I gotta get off. Got a crisis on the other line. I'll call later with details."

"Fine."

"What made me go into this business, Steve? It's the lowest. HELLO, LEONARD, DAR-LING!" Click.

I wake Chris and tell her the good news about the job. She's not enthused.

"How can you leave at a time like this?" she wants to know.

"Like what?"

"When we're working things out!"

"You mean neither of us is ever going on the road again?"

"I can't speak for the future, Steve. I know I don't want you to go now."

"Come on, Chris. It's a big opportunity. If I come through for them with this, the agency'll really push me. Can't you see that? And it's great money!"

"But I turned down that big job in Texas for you!"

"Which I told you was crazy, remember!"

"All right." Chris sighs, turning over to go back to sleep. "If your career is more important than you and me. Suit yourself."

"Oh, come on! Spending some time apart might be just what we need right now."

"There are some actors who'd sell their souls for success."

"Oh, yeah? Well, mine goes for much cheaper. I'd take a little peace of mind!"

Later on in the day Pat calls back with details. And she really means it when she says they need someone practically *immediately*. I'm to fly to Dayton tomorrow, rehearse for *one* day (while performances are canceled) and then go on the evening after.

Needless to say, I spend the rest of the day poring over the *Barefoot* script, memorizing all those lines I knew by heart barely three months ago.

Chris sits with me, although she claims it's against her better judgment, cueing and going over the script.

That evening she prepares a lovely veal dinner capped with a bottle of wine. Afterward I go back to my *Barefoot* script for another couple of hours.

We get into bed fairly early, around eleven, and ultimately stay up most of the night, communicating as we've come to communicate best: no frictions, no hassles, just us.

A perfect going-away gift.

Several hours later, at six thirty, I struggle to get up, having an eight o'clock flight to catch.

I dress, throw some things into a suitcase, down a fast cup of coffee and, just before leaving, wake Chris to say good-bye.

"I don't want you to go!" she whimpers, folding her arms around my neck, drawing me close to her.

We kiss for a long time, and when I finally manage to unlock us, I place a calm finger on her lips, saying, "Listen to me. If things have gotten a little strange around here lately, I want to apologize."

"You don't have to apologize, silly."

"I promise to work harder."

"Me too."

"I'm going to stick around, no matter what, understand?"

"I understand. But what about Mr. Taylor?"

"Who?"

"My landlord. I gave him notice, remember?"

"Oh, right. Yeah." I pause a moment, carefully choosing my words. "Um . . . why don't you tell him you'll be keeping it a few more months. That apartment is the one insurance we've got against each other. Let's not fence ourselves in just yet, okay? We don't need that kind of additional pressure right now."

"All right."

"You agree with me?"

"Sure."

"I'd better get going."

"I love you."

"And I love you, Chris. More than ever. Got it? *More* than ever!"

If you've never been to Dayton, I can't think of a single attraction to make you change your mind about not going.

While I wasn't expecting a throbbing metropolis, I was prepared to arrive someplace that would perhaps faintly resemble civilization as we've come to know it. But honest, cold, gray and dismal, it's worse than Philadelphia! Fortunately, it doesn't matter that the city (town?) is most unappealing to my level of *joi de vivre* anyway, as I've no time to savor it, being met at the airport by the frantic managing director of the theater and whisked immediately away, straight to the theater to rehearse for the duration of the day.

Hours later, at six o'clock, I'm sent to my hotel and told to check in, unpack, have dinner and be back for more rehearsing . . . in an hour.

I do as instructed, grabbing a fast and lousy ham and swiss sandwich in the process and am, at seven o'clock on the button, back on the theater stage, harried, hassled and nauseated.

We rehearse until eleven and, by Equity ruling, must quit. It's been an impossibly long day, and I look forward

with great anticipation to drowning myself in a very wet shower just as soon as I get back to the hotel room.

But no, the managing director and the stage manager have a different idea. After dismissing the rest of the company, they ask if I'd be willing to go back to one of their apartments to continue rehearsing. For the good of the play. Although I'm pretty much burned out, I welcome their slave driving.

Some three hours later I'm so tired and brainwashed, I can't remember if I'm playing Paul or Corie. A little after that, once I start stuttering and slurring my words, the managing director decides it's time to stop the whipping and calls the rehearsal to an end.

Returning to my hotel room, I somehow manage to keep at least one eye open during the fifteen seconds it takes to get to the bed, flop facedown and fall directly to sleep.

Four hours later, at 7 A.M., the stage manager rings me awake, announcing it's time to get up and be onstage in forty minutes.

Just to show them I've got the stuff it takes, I arrive at the theater thirty-five minutes later.

After a fast "Good morning!—sleep well?—let's get to work!" greeting, we start rehearsing again, stopping only to have my wardrobe adjusted and tapered, working pretty much nonstop until noon.

In the half hour allotted for lunch, I try calling Chris at the apartment, but she's not there.

We work the rest of the afternoon, wrapping at six thirty. I continue going over lines in my dressing room until the stage manager comes to get me again, about an hour later.

Returning to the stage with him, we run through, for the last time, the rather intricate new-to-me blocking for the fight scene in the second act.

After that I return to my dressing room, put on my makeup and, before I know it, the stage manager announces over the speaker, "*Half hour, everyone! Half an hour to curtain!*"

As I'm getting into my stuffy lawyer's suit costume, one of

the stagehands bangs on my opened door, yelling, "Phone call for you, Butler. Lady says it's an emergency!"

I have no idea what that cryptic message means as I barrel down the stairs to the pay phone in the Green Room.

"Hello?" I ask, slightly winded.

"I . . . don't . . . undershtand . . . any of it."

"CHRIS?"

"I . . . had . . . no . . . idea. . . ."

"WHAT THE HELL'S THE MATTER?"

No answer.

"CHRIS, WHAT'S WRONG?! SPEAK TO ME!"

"I . . ."

"WHAT?"

"I . . . need you."

Oh, shit! What did I do to deserve this? "CHRIS? JUST WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?"

No answer.

"CHRIS!"

"I'm . . . so tired . . . forgive me."

"WHAT'D YOU TAKE!?"

"Huh?"

"WHAT'D YOU TAKE?"

" . . . Oh . . . not much . . . honest . . . come home, Steve . . . I miss . . . you."

"WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?"

"Nothing . . . I was scared. . . . Please come back."

"CHRIS! THE CURTAIN GOES UP IN TWENTY MINUTES. I CAN'T LEAVE NOW!"

"But . . . I need you . . . I'm lonely."

"LISTEN TO ME. DON'T TAKE ANYTHING ELSE. I'LL CALL MARIE AND SEE IF SHE CAN LOOK IN ON YOU."

"Okay . . . I'm frightened, Steve. . . . I . . . don't feel well."

"I KNOW. DON'T WORRY. EVERYTHING'LL BE FINE. STAY RIGHT THERE!"

Click.

I hang up and immediately dial Marie, who keeps me from eventual cardiac arrest by being home. I tell her what I



think is going on upstairs and ask her to hurry there to see how Chris is and then to call me back at this number as soon as she can.

Click.

*"Fifteen minutes, everyone. Fifteen minutes to curtain!"*

I run upstairs, back to my dressing room, to finish getting ready. I fashion a fast, uncomfortable knot from my tie, throw my suit jacket on, take one last look around, making sure I've got everything I need to go on, and then run back downstairs. And as I run back into the Green Room, completely out of breath, I find this old-timer there, talking on the phone.

After pacing around the room frantically for a couple of minutes, waiting in vain for him to end his conversation, I finally say to the old man, "Listen, I hate to interrupt you, but I'm expecting an emergency call to come through on this phone. If you could just get off for a few minutes, you'd be doing me a really big favor!"

The old man looks me up and down a couple of times, quite slowly, saying nothing to me, but projecting great mistrust, before casually saying back into the receiver, "Hey, Martha. Feller here says he needs to use the phone. I'll call ya back in a few minutes. What's that? . . . Yeah. . . . A few minutes. . . . All right. . . . Bye!"

Click.

"Thank you very much. You're quite nice. Believe me, I wouldn't've asked if it weren't important."

*"TEN MINUTES, EVERYONE. TEN MINUTES TO CURTAIN!"*

I pace the room several more minutes while the old man sits on a couch, watching me marching back and forth, back and forth.

*"FIVE MINUTES, PLEASE. FIVE MINUTES, EVERYONE. FIVE MINUTES TO CURTAIN!"*

"I'm sorry, young feller. I've got to finish my call and get to my light switches before the curtain goes up. I can't wait anymore."

"Please don't!" I beg him. "Isn't there another phone you can use? Please! This is really important!"

"I'll just be a moment. Have to tell Martha where to meet me after the show."

He goes for the phone, and just as he's about to reach for the receiver, it rings.

"HELLO?" I roar after grabbing the receiver out of the old man's hands.

"It's okay," says Marie. "She'll be fine. Just got a little hysterical and was mixing downs with some vodka."

"She's okay?"

"Sure. A bit druggy and incoherent, but sobering up. I'll stay with her a couple of hours. Sit here till she falls asleep."

"Marie, you've saved my life! I can't begin to thank you."

"Yeah, I'm a regular Clara Barton. Don't worry. Hey, don't you have a performance tonight?"

**"PLACES, EVERYONE! PLACES, PLEASE!"**

"Yeah. I've got a performance tonight. I'll call you in a few hours."

"I'll be here."

"Thanks a million."

**"PLACES!"** announces the stage manager again, with great authority. **"PLACES, EVERYBODY. PLEASE!"**

I've heard that announcement all my life, and it has always meant one thing. For the next few hours nothing else matters; everything else stops. The show is now all. So, like a Pavlovian dog, I instinctively walk to the wings to prepare my entrance. Carefully shutting out the past half hour, I've no choice but to focus all energies on getting through this performance. The last thought, in fact, I remember Steve Butler thinking as I start sinking into character, is a small pang of guilt for having got annoyed at Marie several days ago when she gobbled up most of the caviar. That and a fleeting image of Chris, down, out, alone back in New York. Something desperate, almost pathetic about it . . . but the image is swift and soon gone. Pushed miraculously somewhere to the back of my brain, filed away for later on, as this new person, Paul Brater, assumes command, taking over all controls.

And so, as Paul Brater, I arrive at the wings.

There's a great deal of scurrying about. The lights in the

backstage area go out as the lights onstage come up. The stagehands stop hammering, the propman stops issuing orders, the electrician stops cursing at his assistant, and the leading lady playing Corie, a seasoned veteran of some seven television soap operas, walks past me, patting me on the backside, tossing off, "Merde, kiddo!"

"Thanks a lot," I answer.

A few other members of the cast and the managing director also come up to me and whisper their best wishes.

The murmur of the audience coming from the other side of the curtain seems to rise to a peak and then suddenly drops off, sending a light jolt of adrenalin through my system and a battalion of butterflies dancing in my stomach, as I know the houselights must be dimming.

As the audience settles down, getting more comfortable and less audible, a voice suddenly comes over a microphone. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. AT THIS PERFORMANCE THE PART OF PAUL BRATER WILL BE PLAYED BY MR. STEVE BUTLER."

Well, friends, the tone of hostility, the sense of anger, the moans of disappointment, the trauma of outrage vibrating out there, sifting over the footlights, through the curtain toward me, is almost enough to make me turn around, chuck the whole thing and return to Gotham at once.

You'd think, from their reaction, these sophisticated theatergoers had just been told Marlon Brando would not be doing *A Streetcar Named Desire* at this evening's performance.

At last the uprising ends, and the audience quiets down. For the shortest of moments, absolutely nothing can be heard. Then the curtain rises, and the stagelights immediately flood out into the orchestra, illuminating at least the first twelve rows of the house.

The audience takes in the set, reacting with soft ahs and ohs and scattered polite applause.

After a few beats, the actress playing Corie bursts through the door onstage and runs through her small new apartment, surveying it with great vigor.

Standing there watching her, I realize I'm totally relaxed

and removed from all goings-on in New York and that's good and the audience seems most responsive so far, applauding Corie's entrance and that's good, and she gets a laugh or two on her first couple of pieces of business and that's good, and I start reviewing my entrance coming up in a couple of minutes, my approach, my climbing the stairs, my motivation, my blocking, and as I'm doing this, it slowly dawns upon me that I have absolutely no idea what my first entrance line is and that's not so good.

Panicked, hostile and manic, I dart over to the stage manager's desk and, practically pushing him aside, frantically leaf ahead a few pages in his script to my entrance cue.

PAUL: It's six flights. . . . Did you know it's six flights?

Whew! Of course. It all comes back now.

Cavalierly brushing aside the doubting looks of the stage manager, who is probably now reprimanding himself for not having gone ahead and taken that tranquilizer so as to be able to manage this evening's performance, I return to my place in the wings.

Eventually, my offstage cues come up. I shout them out to Corie onstage as I pretend to be walking up the many flights of stairs to our apartment.

At last, on cue, appropriately out of breath, I walk onstage.

"It's six flights. . . . Did you know it's six flights?"

Which is greeted with the warm reception of three people clapping. My fans are everywhere.

And this means if there are three people out there polite enough to be giving me a chance, I've only got, by my calculation, another two thousand, three hundred and ninety-seven to charm. And, in case you've never done it, don't harbor any illusions that there aren't plenty of easier things to do in this world than convert a theater full of down-in-the-mouth patrons challenging you to dare be good enough to get them over their initial disappointment that you're not who they thought they came to see in the first place.

The happy truth, however, is that everything goes surprisingly smooth. It's not quite the old cliché of the Star



Got Sick and I Was Told to Go On in His Place so I went out there an *unknown* but came back a *STAR*!

But in all due modesty, working under such pressure and managing to overcome all that early antagonism, ultimately getting them to like me, so thrills this truly surprised audience, they really let me know their appreciation when I come out for the curtain call.

And standing there, bowing, being greeted and warmed by all that affection cascading across the footlights, wave after wave after wave, is, like exceptional sex, the most exhilarating feeling of power, excitement, satisfaction, acceptance and accomplishment imaginable.

And it is at the peak of all this attention being lavished on me, as the rest of the cast turns to me, joining the audience in their tumultuous applause, that I realize it's perhaps the quest for this very rare and most anonymous mass love that probably motivates at least part of me to be able to put up with all the hostilities and disappointments and rejections and bullshit it takes to stay in there, fighting, sacrificing most anything to find work.

The curtain falls for the last time, and most of the cast and crew come over, offering congratulations.

The stage manager then announces that everyone'll be going over to the Broken Drum, the local hangout, for drinks and supper and asks me to join them. I gladly accept.

Walking back toward my dressing room, still flushed with the narcotic of the performance pulsating through me, I realize Paul Brater is leaving and Steve Butler fast returning. And with the return of Steve Butler, of course, comes the return of his problems. Or, more specifically, his problem: Chris.

Whirling around, I rush into the Green Room and place another call to New York.

"Nothing to worry about," says Marie. "Everything's fine now. She's calmed down and sleeping like a baby. I'll stay with her a little longer, make sure she doesn't wake up frightened again."

"I don't know what I would've done without you, Marie."

"Don't be silly. How'd the show go?"



"Well. Very well, I think."

"Good."

"All right. Tell Chris I'll call tomorrow."

"Will do."

"And thanks again."

"Talk to you soon. Congratulations."

As I replace the phone, I'm suddenly assaulted with a massive attack of exhaustion. It's as though all the tension and lack of sleep over the past two days have stretched my tolerances as far as they are capable, and suddenly, like a dam bursting from too much water, everything begins to sag.

Slowly dragging myself back to my dressing room, I can't even summon the wherewithal to remove my makeup. So I just crash there on the couch as is and sleep until awakened several hours later by the night watchman who wisely suggests I'd probably be more comfortable sleeping in my hotel room.

But when you're exhausted, even eight hours' sleep isn't enough. I get up the next morning, still fairly beat, though seething mad.

Now that the hysteria of yesterday's emergency has passed, I can only look back and regard it with distaste. What a cruel and totally selfish thing for Chris to have done. That ridiculous stunt. That neurotic bid for attention. Not half an hour before curtain. And she's an actress, for God's sake. She should know better than to pull something at the last minute like that.

I'm furious. Plain and simply livid. And make the foolish mistake of calling and telling her so.

"Steve! Hi, darling."

"How are you feeling?"

"Much better. Wasn't all that silly?"

"That's one way to look at it."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"I don't know what came over me. I suddenly got so frightened and lonely without you. It won't happen again."

"Fine. Well, I've got to get over to the theater for notes. I just wanted to see how you were."

"Much better, thank you."

"Good."

"Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"How'd the performance go?"

"Which one, Chris? Yours or mine?"

"That wasn't very nice."

"It wasn't supposed to be."

"You're mad at me, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"What can I do?"

"I don't know, Chris. Try straightening out. I don't know. Nothing. You're fine. Maybe it's me. I just need some time to simmer down. Forgive me."

"Please don't apologize."

"All right. I retract the remark."

"Much better. I love you."

"Good. I gotta go now. I don't want to be late."

"I won't keep you then."

"Good-bye, Chris."

"Good-bye."

That afternoon Pat calls from New York to say the managing director had phoned to tell her what a good job I'd done and wanted me to know how everyone in the agency has been told about it and this can only be very good for me.

What else is new? Any other time in my life I'd've been dancing from the ceilings with such encouragement. But the cloud of Chris hangs sourly above, rendering me measurably miserable.

That evening the performance is even smoother than the night before. Not only am I more relaxed and confident, but so are all the other players, who last night had to work with practically a total stranger.

After the show I go out with the cast, over to the Broken Drum. We eat, drink and chat, mainly about the show. Our *Barefoot in the Park* is at the center of all our universes right now, and so it serves as common denominator for all discussion.

And it's a pleasure zeroing in on something other than that which is hammering away at the back of my head, still keeping me moody and upset amid all this buoyant outside activity.

I return to my hotel room around one and, after changing my mind seven times, decide finally *not* to call Chris. I'm still too annoyed with her. Still too thrown. I've no idea what to say, am afraid I'd probably say the wrong thing anyway. I simply have to give it more time. Wait till I've cooled off and sorted things out at least to the extent I've some idea what's going on.

So I go to sleep, trying to forget the whole thing, at least for a time.

The following day I don't even begin to get out of bed until one in the afternoon. It's amazing the world of good a solid twelve hours' rest can provide a weary body. My mind is now less muddled and able to focus again with less blur.

But I'm still too annoyed to call Chris.

In fact, it isn't until another two days pass that I finally start to unwind and begin considering how truly upset *she* must've been to get the two of us into a near catastrophe like that.

And so, with time, my anger subsides, melting away as always, into compassion and at least a small amount of understanding of her very strange ways.

So it is with this eventual conciliatory tone that I pick up the phone to call the kid again, in New York.

"Steve?"

"You bet!"

"How are you?" This last question delivered calm, cold, subdued.

"Better, thanks."

"Yes?"

"Yes. It's all going well here. Really well."

"That's good."

"Everything all right, Chris? You sound a little down."

"I know. . . . It's, well, among other things Ruth got sick yesterday afternoon."

"Oh, shit."

"Had six or seven fits in a row. Really bad ones. So I took her over to the Animal Medical Center, to their emergency room."

"And?"

"And you may have a little trouble believing this, but they accepted her as a patient and transferred her to the intensive care ward."

"Intensive care?"

"Right. She was practically comatose by the time I got her there, and the vet said she's got to be watched around the clock several days."

"Damn."

"Well, at least you're making a lot of money there, so you can afford the whopper of a bill you're going to get."

"How long?"

"Maybe a week. I'm sorry, Steve. I tried comforting her, honest. I told her I'd been in intensive care myself and it was a ball. She wasn't much impressed, though."

"I don't blame her. How are you?"

"Fair."

I really don't like the tone in her voice. "What's up?"

"Well, I got a commercial today." She tells me as if she just found out she were being sent to Auschwitz.

"That's great! Good for you!"

"Yeah."

"What is it?"

"Breeze again. Remember that shampoo job I did for Clairol?"

"Right."

"Apparently they liked it so much, they've decided to use both a city background and a tropical setting, for contrast. So we're all going down to St. Lucia to shoot it."

"How fabulous!"

"I know. Being paid to go on vacation. Can't ask for a better deal than that, huh?"

"I guess not."

"I met with the director today to discuss it. We worked together on the other spot as well. Nice guy."

"I'm really pleased."

"And I don't have to tell you how I could use the rest."

"Honest. You don't have to tell *me*. When do you go?"

"About two weeks." She answers with just the slightest impatience.

"Something bothering you, Chris?"

"Who, *me*?" she offers, total innocence.

I know I'm in trouble. "Yeah, you. Let's have it."

"Forget it."

If only we could. "No. Tell me."

"All right. For openers, why didn't you call, Steve? After what happened the other night, how could you not call till now?"

"I was calming down, Chris. Thinking things out."

"No excuse! You must've known you were driving me crazy!"

"Come on, Chris. Don't do this to me."

"To *YOU*? Don't do this to *ME*! I'm the one going bananas here, wondering where the hell you are, why you haven't called, getting sick watching your dog having those terrifying convulsions."

"Well, why didn't you call me? Phones dial both ways."

"I didn't think you wanted to speak with me!"

"Back to that insecurity, are we?"

"It's no insecurity. I have a pretty good idea what's going on there."

"What are you talking about?"

"You and the actress playing Corie. You're balling with her, right?"

"Jesus," I sigh. "Where do you come up with them?"

"Don't you talk down to me! I know what's going on! The tarot cards were most specific!"

"All right, Chris. Calm down."



"Don't tell me to calm down. You haven't been having my problems. What about *us*?"

"That's a tough one. I'm not sure."

"Well I've had plenty of time to think."

"And?"

"And I've realized you're retreating."

"Not again, Chris. Let's not do that one again, huh? It's getting boring. Find some new material."

"You're growing distant. I know you, Steve. Better than anyone. And this time I'm not being paranoid. Don't you think I sense the difference in you?"

"Chris, you're talking crazy again. If I'm annoyed at you, it's because you frustrate me so. I'm going bonkers trying to figure out how to deal with you and all your goddamn neuroses."

"Wrong. You're growing distant."

"You'll just have to take my word for it that I'm not."

"I don't."

"All right, Chris. I'll play your game. Jesus, you sure know how to bring a fellow down. Tell me. Tell me how I'm retreating from you."

"Don't patronize me!"

"I didn't mean to."

"You did!"

"All right. I'm sorry. Please tell me. Give me an example, so I can answer you. Okay?"

"It's not all that simple, I'm afraid."

"Why do you insist upon talking in riddles?"

"I am not talking in riddles. All right, you want an example, here: when you wouldn't let me give up my apartment. That's backing down, buddy. No matter how you word it."

"But I told you. . . ."

"You told me nothing! If you were upset that I hadn't consulted you, that'd make sense. But you went past that and told me *not* to break my lease."

"For justified reasons!"

"Wrong! You think about it, Steve. You just relax awhile and think about it. Sad news is you'll realize I'm right."

"You're really starting to wig out, Chris. Why don't you start listening to yourself awhile?"

"I've been doing nothing else since you left."

"I don't know, Chris. Maybe you ought to think about going back to your shrink. Maybe he can straighten some of this out."

"Me? Go back?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Well, maybe you ought to *start* seeing one."

"Chris. . . ."

"My biggest mistake . . . I thought I knew you so well . . . my biggest mistake was thinking you were different. But you're not. You're no better than any of them. No matter how you slice it, Steve, once again it's still the same fucking runaround."

I stare at the phone a few moments, unable to collect the many abstract thoughts zooming around inside my brain. At last I say quietly, "I can't discuss this anymore, Chris. I'm too tired. Too talked out. I can't even think. I guess I need time to find some way to convince you how wrong you are. But not now. Everything is suddenly too complicated. I've got to hang up. I'll talk to you."

"Good-bye, Steve."

"Good-bye."

As I hang up, I realize I'm actually *more* confused than before the conversation began. So once again, I choose to file things away until such time when it might be possible to lay the pieces out in some ABC fashion.

I let another two days pass, in fact, without even letting the subject of Chris cross my mind.

On the third day a very strange thing happens.

After ordering a late breakfast delivered to my room, I sit down to eat, numbed by the afternoon giveaway show of greed and avarice blaring from the tube, and it suddenly occurs to me, while buttering a piece of whole wheat toast, that she could be right.

This notion so disturbs my equilibrium I discontinue the buttering process at once, turn off the telly and sit there to think it through.

I have been so in control, so on the prowl, so fanatically busy watching and blocking all of Chris' moves these past many weeks, I haven't allowed myself the distraction of observing my own behavior.

And in taking into account all I've done and all she's done, I don't suppose anything in all these many weeks of living together has been quite so hesitant a balk as my not allowing Chris to give up her apartment. Shit!

Is it actually possible after all these years of begging for Chris' undivided affections, I'm not fully prepared to accept them? Is it somehow conceivable that somewhere in the recesses of my mind, though no doubt placed there by her lunicidal shenanigans, I told her not to give up her apartment because I was secretly harboring the fear we might not eventually work things out together, after all?

Which of us, then, was not living up to our part of the bargain?

She has certainly grown as possessive, crazy and as destructive as she said she would. No surprise there.

But had I not welcomed and tended to these machinations as I'd promised? Suddenly, looking back, I realize she is right. I *am* retreating. I *am* growing impatient. I guess I haven't remained a bachelor these thirty years for nothing.

Incredible as it seems, in her own subverted way, that business with the lease on her apartment was perhaps an ultimate test to my determination and commitment.

And I blew it.

After all, somewhere in the core of this mess is the fact I'm crazy about that Madwoman of Chaillot. She drives me up the wall and way past the point of distraction. But that must be the price paid for loving her. And I won't give that up no matter the cost.

All right, big shot.

Now what do you do?

I'll call and tell her she's right. I've seen the light. I'll tell her to break her lease and move in with me for good. I may not have the strength right now to put up with all her needs,

but shit, we've got so much going, she'll just have to bear with me. Don't I bear with her?

And she'll understand. I know she will. Surely she'll allow me this one slip after her score of tumbles.

So I call.

No answer.

I put the television on again in time, treat of treats, for *The Newlywed Game*. Just your average, run-of-the-mill Pan-Kansas good-looking American couples destroying one another before six million viewers, proving daily the unworkability of the institution of marriage. I sit down at the table, rebutter my toast and wait a while before calling again.

And again.

And again.

And on and on late into the afternoon and early evening until I have to leave for the theater . . . in what is now a very cold rain. Scenic Dayton sure knows how to show a fellow a good time.

I try calling again before the show. And after.

No answer. I leave word on her service. They say she hasn't checked with them yet.

I call from the Broken Drum.

Same thing.

I get home around two and try once more before going to sleep.

Nothing.

The next morning, again.

Still no answer.

And in the afternoon. And evening.

And the following day as well. And she still hasn't checked in with her service.

It isn't until the morning after that, at six in the evening, that I finally reach her.

"Hello?"

"At last!"

"What?"

"I finally got you!"

"That you, Steve?"

"Yeah!"

"Hi."

"Where've you been?"

"I was going to call you."

"I was worried."

"Sorry. Been meaning to call."

"Doesn't matter. I finally got you."

"Right."

"I've been thinking about things for days."

"Me too."

"About us and what's going on."

"Me too."

"And I've all sorts of things to tell you."

"Same here."

"I think things are going to work out."

"Me too."

"Everything's gonna be fine."

"I agree. All we need, Steve, is a little time to adjust."

"Exactly."

"Then you agree with me?"

"Absolutely."

"What a relief. I was sure I'd have a terrible time convincing you we should go back to being friends again."

What'd she say?

"Steve, can you hear me?"

"What?"

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I can. What did you say?"

"I said I think it's important we recognize the mistake we made and go back to being friends. Like before. Preconfusion."

"NO!" I yell over the wires.

"Steve. . . ."

"NO, CHRIS, NO! NO! NO!"

"Now come on, Steve. Don't make it any more difficult than it already is."

"It's not difficult, Chris. It's all my fault. I know that now."



That's why I've been trying to reach you. To tell you how sorry I was about the business with the lease. You were right. I was balking. But no more. No more. Honest. Call your landlord and tell him you're moving out. Tell him you're moving in with me. Tell him that."

"No, Steve. It's too late."

"IT'S NOT!"

"It is!"

"NO!"

"Please listen to me, Steve. If you're upset, it's probably because of the newness of the whole idea. It shook me initially too. But once you sit down and think about it, I'm sure you'll agree it's best."

"IT IS NOT!"

"Steve, if I thought you were going to be this stubborn, I never would've answered the phone."

"But why, Chris? Tell me why?"

"Don't you know? Once you left, I stepped back and saw what was going on, what I was doing, everything possible to prove it could never work. And then with the lease you finally showed me I was right."

"But I changed my mind about the lease!"

"Let's stop fooling ourselves. If it wasn't the lease, it would've been something else. Don't you see, it's just no good. It could only get worse. Me with my crazies, you growing distant. And sooner or later you'd *have* to sour on me and I couldn't possibly cope with that. Anything but a rejection from you on that level."

"But I wasn't retreating!"

"You just admitted you were!"

"For a moment. Only for a moment. I told you that. That's what I've been trying to explain."

"No, Steve. We have to level off for a while. It's the only way."

"No, Chris. I will not allow this. I won't. I'll fly home tonight if it'll help. I don't care about anything else. Just you. If we're having a crisis, that's no time to quit. We'll work it out. I'll try harder, Chris. Please. Please . . . for me."

"It's too late. It's all behind us now. Besides . . . I've met someone else."

I didn't hear her. I know I didn't hear her.

"Steve?"

Hang up. Hang up the phone, fool. Put the receiver down and walk away. Listen to me.

"Steve? Are you there?"

". . . Yes."

"Then listen to me. Don't be upset."

Upset? What's there to be upset about?

"Steve? Listen. You know how I can talk myself into most anything, right? Well, once you started wavering, I decided to get out before the bomb went off. Otherwise, the next step would probably be me groveling at your feet."

"Never! I wouldn't let you!"

"We'd have no way of stopping it. It's my pattern. I couldn't take the chance. So I've transferred affections."

"Trouble with you, Chris, is you just won't believe someone could love you as much as I. That's it. Otherwise, you wouldn't be saying these things."

"Not true, Steve. I know exactly what I'm doing. I'm not suggesting this new guy is any great shakes. I'll never have with him what we had."

Hang up, dummy. Hang up and walk away. Why are you doing this to yourself?

"He's no big deal, Steve. Honest. Just someone to kill the pain until I get over you."

"But why? Who is he?"

"Andrew Southern. The director. We met a few months ago. He shot my Clairrol job. Doing the next one with me in St. Lucia, too. When I went to see him the other day, I found him attractive and most interested. So we've been seeing each other, and it's been very nice. He's taking care of me, which is what I need. He helps get my mind off you."

"NO, Chris, NO! You're rationalizing and concocting and blowing things up. Ball with this guy if you want, but don't destroy what we have."

"We have nothing left."

"We do too!"

"You stopped loving me, Steve. You walked out!"

"Wrong! Your father walked out. He's the one who abandoned you, remember? I just took a job for two weeks in another city. Will you for once in your life stop wrecking things? Please, Chris. Don't fuck this one up. It's too important."

"You should've thought of that earlier. My romantic feelings for you are changing. I'll see to that. My hope is we can still be friends."

"FRIENDS!"

"Sure. Don't you see what a blessing this probably is? Actually, it's the best thing could've happened. Now with Andy in the picture you and I can put Humpty-Dumpty together again. No complications, okay?"

"NO! I DON'T WANT TO BE YOUR FRIEND!"

"Come on, Steve. Don't get ugly. I'll bring the dog over to my place. He'll be fine. It'll be better this way. Trust me. And just wait until you meet Andy!"

"ARE YOU CRAZY? I DON'T WANT TO MEET HIM! TELL HIM I'LL KILL HIM IF I MEET HIM! YOU'RE MINE, CHRIS, AND I'M NOT LETTING YOU GO, UNDERSTAND? I WORKED TOO HARD AND LONG FOR THIS. I'LL BE HOME IN A FEW DAYS. PLEASE . . . BE THERE . . . WE'LL WORK IT OUT. I PROMISE!"

"If it were only possible, Steve. But it's not going to work. We have to stop. You know better than anyone, when the play's no good, the smartest thing to do is fold out of town. It's just dumb bringing in a flop. If we're smart, if we get out now, before it gets worse, maybe we can salvage something."

Hang up. Hang up, fool. You're shaking all over; your head's pounding; your stomach's turning inside out. Fool! Enough is enough! HANG UP THE GODDAMN PHONE!

"And, Steve, don't you think you ought—"

Click.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Well!

After that particular telephone conversation, the rest of my time in Dayton, while not performing at the Playhouse, is, as you might well imagine, just one big, long party.

Ever been alone, in a strange dull city, no one around you would even care to talk with, sad, down, discouraged and depressed?

That must be how Dostoevsky spent his youth.

And aren't there poets who say this kind of misery, this angst, builds character? If so, I'd prefer to remain shallow.

And remember what I said earlier about love being just like all the clichés in all the songs in all the movies? . . . Well, forget it. I rescind the remark.

Screw MGM!

If this is what love does to people, may those goddamned Cupid arrows never pierce me again.

Flying home to New York days later to Face the Music, it suddenly dawns on me, in this belated blaze of perception, that Chris wasn't really all that serious about splitting up.

Of course! Why didn't I understand sooner! Sometimes her gimmicks are harder to unravel than others. It's probably all a childish hoax. Another test. She just wants to see if I can take it. Clever fox! All of it simply another of her harmless, though well-intentioned, pranks designed to make me appreciate her even more. I guess I'll just have to show her how very much she was missed. Poor, insecure thing.

I'll arrive and greet her, warm as ever, telling her right off the bat how much I really love her, how very much I

need her, standing there, holding each other, thrilled to be together again, laughing like always, anxiously undressing, staying up the whole night making love, eating in bed and drinking and smoking and music, another nibble, another joint, another roll, another album, another encounter, a shower together, a new composer, some dessert, maybe even still another session, God, I'll try, all day and all night if that's what she wants, with all our candles burning low until morning peeks through the shades, waxing cold and blue and with the sunrise we'll bundle up and climb the creaking stairs to my badly tarred roof with coffee and croissants for a shivering breakfast overlooking a slowly awakening West Side, before heading back down to the apartment, falling asleep for a while, wrapped together, warm, content, sated until we wake hours later, making love all over again, drawing the blinds, shutting out the day, more candles all around the room, the stereo underscoring our escape for days and days, never getting up, never going out, going on like this forever; another round, another snack, another day, another week, another, another, another another another. . . .

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! WE ARE APPROACHING KENNEDY INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT. WILL YOU PLEASE MAKE SURE YOUR SEAT BELTS ARE SECURELY FASTENED AND YOUR SEAT IS IN AN UPRIGHT POSITION? EXTINGUISH ALL CIGARETTES. THANK YOU.

But I guess I'm not surprised when I walk into the dark and empty apartment. Not really.

Throwing my suitcase on the bed, I call Chris. When she answers the phone, something slams me in the stomach, sending a mountain of anxiety, hostility and complete adoration through my system. As collected as I can, I quickly disguise my true feelings, and casually tell her I've just returned home and ask if it would be all right to come over and pick up Harry.

Fairly collected herself, Chris says it would be fine. Please come by.



"Hello, Steve," says a stunning Chris, opening the door wide, allowing me in. God, why couldn't this be one of her off days? As I walk past her, I know not what to say. I do know, though, the scene calls for no sense of reality.

"Guy in the neighborhood told me you got a dog for sale, lady."

"Right." Chris plays along. "This seventy-pound puppy." Chris points to fat Harry as the bulldog meanders his way over to greet me.

"Hi, Harry," I say, bending down to embrace the beast, encouraged to find someone happy to see me. As Harry and I slobber over each other, Chris goes into the kitchen, returning moments later with his plastic eating dish.

"His dish," she says softly, placing it on the floor next to me. "I'll get the leash."

"Thank you," I answer, never taking my eyes from the dog.

Again Chris leaves the room, this time to the bedroom, before returning with the leash.

"Here," she says, dropping it next to the dish.

I pick up the dish and the leash and look at Chris for a few seconds.

She stares back.

All this very uncomfortable for both of us. But I still don't know what to say. I can't even think of any light chatter. So I remain in character. "How much for the pup, miss?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Truth is you can have him for the asking. Just give him a good home, willya?"

"Sure thing, ma'am," I snap back. "You can count on that."

"Good," says Chris, just the slightest bit edgy. Just a touch nervous.

I look over at her again, but now she has trouble meeting my gaze. So I look down, embarrassed. I don't know why I should feel embarrassed, but there it is.

Awkward and ill at ease, I make the mistake of asking, "How are you?"

"I've been better," she informs me. "Things are really

going quite well with me and Andy, and that of course makes for an easier adjustment."

"Chris, there are about a thousand things I'd prefer to hear other than some barometric accounting of your love life. If you don't mind, I'm just not interested. . . ."

"I'm not trying to rub it in, Steve. I just know from past experience how much it helps to latch onto someone else, anyone, after a strong affair doesn't work out."

"That how I first got into the picture? Just happened to be in the way while you were bouncing off Bradley?"

"You know that's not true! I'm only suggesting you start seeing other people. Makes it easier, that's all. Is there anything wrong with trying to soften the pain?"

"I guess not," I say after a while.

Looking down, I rub the back of Harry's ears as we're visited again by that awful pregnant silence during which neither of us has anything to say.

No one speaks for what seems like a month, and so finally I attach Harry's leash. "Well, I guess we'll be off. Thanks for the dog."

"Quite all right."

I stand up and look Chris straight in the eye again. This time she returns the stare. After a few beats of basic discomfort, Chris eventually says, "Let's talk in a couple of days, okay?"

"Sure, kid. Let's get together and have lunch real soon."

"Come on. I'm serious."

"So am I," I return, flip as possible.

"Call if you need anything."

"You bet, sister."

"I'm only trying to be helpful."

I turn and open the door. But as I start to walk out, I find I cannot. Something won't let me. My legs are locked. I try again but can't budge. Some strained feeling of sadness and futility empowers me, telling me to say something, do something, anything to keep the conversation going, anything to be with her a few more moments, anything to stay here. Anything while I search for a way to convince her she's making a mistake, that she's got to come back. I must tell her

how this whole mess blew up too fast—too sudden—too illogically. She has to tell me how we could jump one day from bliss down to ugliness and slime the next. She's got to tell me why two sensitive, intelligent people who care so very much for each other can't work this out. She's got to tell me what I did to have such a perfect setup slip through my fingers. She's got to tell me all these things. And she's got to tell me how she could do all this to us. To herself and to me.

*Me*, for God's sake.

Her best friend!

But as I fumble about, wanting to ask her to tell me all these things—trying to demand some better, broader explanation—I find it impossible to summon the words. I find it, in fact, impossible to say anything. I simply cannot talk. The words will not come. I can sort of move my mouth, but still, nothing comes out. So I try to speak again, but this time everything's so bottled up, so choked, the only sound that emerges is this absurd dry whimper. Then, out of left field, this reservoir of tears start mounting behind my eyeballs, which is the last thing I expected or wanted, and it takes all the strength I've got to hold them at bay.

Paralyzed, I stand there, unable to speak, unable to move, capable only of making this strange, barely audible plea for assistance. Finding it suddenly impossible to swallow, I reach out, extending my arm toward Chris, my moving fingers signaling her in agony.

Saddened and no doubt frightened by the sight of this pitiful, helpless animal before her, Chris takes a step back, shaking her head from side to side, now fighting back her own tears, pleading, "Please don't hate me, Steve."

And the dam breaks.

"I DON'T HATE YOU!" I scream, pounding the wall with my fist. "DON'T YOU KNOW? I HATE MYSELF! I HATE WHO I AM!"

Chris rushes forward, attempting to take me in her arms. But I push her back flailing my arms. "DON'T YOU TOUCH ME!" I roar, trying to figure out how my face got so wet, so hot, so fast. "DON'T COME NEAR ME!"

She backs off, genuinely frightened. "Please, Steve," she pleads. "You're upsetting me!"

"I'M UPSETTING YOU? *I'M UPSETTING YOU!*"

"Yes. You are. Stop it."

"I'm upsetting you?" I repeat, trying to clamp my near hysteria. "Well, forgive me, Chris. How awfully rude. Last thing I would ever want is to see *you* upset." All this anger. All this fury. Coming up. Bursting out. "I'm sorry, Chris. I wonder if you can know how sorry! Hey! Here's a thought! Why don't you just forget about the whole thing, huh? Just think of it as a passing fancy. Better still, make believe none of it ever happened, okay? Forget we ever met. Maybe that way you won't have to be upset. For goodness sake, Chris, don't be upset. Don't even give it a second thought. *YOU GODDAMN SELFISH BITCH!*"

Now that I'm finally able, I pull the dog and walk out, slamming the door behind me.

In the days following that rewarding scene in Chris' apartment, I get very busy, making the rounds at producers' offices and with casting agents, dropping off photos, looking for appointments, something I haven't done in years. I want only to flush from my system this gnawing unhappiness circling the pit of my stomach and racing around the back of my head.

And it seems only this constant unnecessary overactivity slightly alleviates my deep feelings of anxiety and distress, helping me get her momentarily off my mind and onto other gratefully less important matters.

But I can't really get very far away from her, no matter how preoccupied I think I am. In the next three days, she calls twice. We are both more than cordial, albeit overly formal. And both times we speak, I pretend to be running off to some audition, so I've no time to chat.

At the end of our second conversation, I get off by adding, "If you should come to your senses, call. I'll be waiting. In the meantime, would you mind canceling these momentary whims of charity?"



Chris hangs up on me at this point, and I don't hear from her again.

It is, as you can well imagine, a fairly awful time to be living through. I'm still dazed. Still trying to figure just what happened and why and how and so on. Maybe I just should have known better. I've seen her go through scores of men in the past five years, screwing up would-be attachments, watching as boyfriends dropped like flies.

What the hell gave me the conceit to think I'd be any different? In retrospect, I wish to shit I knew.

In the past, when Chris started in on her cunning devices which ultimately tripped her up, it was easy to sit back and watch. I never minded. It always meant she'd soon be breaking up with whoever's mind it was she was blowing and would eventually be coming back to me.

In the past, when Chris would be having man problems, I used to find her a lost, shattered kitten left out in the rain, and I always felt it my welcomed responsibility to tend to, care for and nurse her back to stability. Those times we were always at our closest.

What upsets me almost more than anything is now that the man problem is me, I'm too busy with my own disappointment and grief to be able to comfort her.

Ruth is still in the hospital, drugged and sustained on sedatives, adding no small amount of tension to my problems. Even poor Harry is moping about the apartment, no doubt wondering what became of our female companions.

All these malevolently negative elements governing my life finally dip to their nadir and, having no place else to go, start improving, ever so slightly.

On Tuesday, Ruth is discharged from the animal hospital with what is diagnosed as a fairly stable condition accompanied by a generally depressed temperament. What, her too? I bring her home, and Harry goes wild, getting so excited to be reunited with his longlost friend, he drools all over her.

On Wednesday, Pat calls to say the producers of *March into April* have finally made a decision.



My heart stops beating as I stiffen to hear this verdict which has kept me pent up for so many months.

"Well," she says joyously. "After much discussion, they've finally managed to narrow their choices down to you and one other fellow! Isn't that fabulous?"

"You call that making a decision, Pat?"

"Well, listen, dar-ling. It's not a firm offer or anything, but at least they're still mighty interested."

"I see."

"It's very good news, believe me. They've auditioned everyone and his brother for this play. Anyone that could crawl on that stage, I think."

"I see."

"And they asked what your price range is, so we know they're not just jerking off, right?"

"If you say so."

"I say so."

"Good. Um, Pat, do you know when they'll decide?"

"Stay there a minute, Stevel!" Pat blurts out before cutting me off, leaving me suspended on Hold for a time. When she comes back, she's very upset. "That damned Coast office. They can never get it straight. I told them Michele Lee gets at least three thou a week, and they thought I was talking about Michel Legrand. Now how does anyone with even a pea brain confuse those two?"

"I don't know," I feed.

"What a shitty business. What a shitty business. Oops, there's the other phone!"

"Wait! Pat, do you know when they'll decide?"

"Who?"

"*March into April*, remember?"

"Oh, right! No, of course not. Do I look like some kind of crystal ball? They start rehearsals next month, tour for the summer and bring it in next season. Gotta go. The other phone. 'Bye!" Click.

Several evenings later, around eleven, while debating which might get me more disillusioned, the news on ABC or CBS, the phone rings.

"Hello?"

"Steve?" comes the sheepish voice of Chris on the other end.

"Yes?"

"I've got a favor to ask."

"What is it?"

"I'm leaving for St. Lucia tomorrow."

"Have a good time."

"Roger's loaned me his car for the day."

"And?"

"I was wondering if you'd drive me to the airport."

"What's the matter with what's-his-name, your director?"

"I was hoping *you'd* take me. That's all. If it's too much trouble, never mind. I'll see you."

"Wait a minute! Don't hang up. I didn't say it was any trouble. Relax. As a matter of fact, I've got a pretty light day tomorrow. I could drive you."

"Good. Thanks. It'd mean a lot to me."

Something in her voice sounds even more off than might be expected, even under the circumstances. "You okay?"

"Sure."

"What's wrong?"

"What isn't?"

"Something new?"

"No. I'm all right." She sighs, indicating she's anything but.

"You want me to come over for a while?"

"No. It's okay."

"No trouble. I'm right in the neighborhood." What the hell is suddenly making me so good-natured?

"Well, all right. If you don't mind."

"I'll see you in half an hour."

"Come on in," says a beautiful, even if swollen-eyed, Chris.

"You're looking well," I say, which is almost true.

Chris dismisses the compliment with a shrug. "How about some coffee?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"All right, Chris," I say, as she hands me a steaming cup several minutes later. "The doctor is *in*. Five cents a visit. Let's hear it."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the resounding waves of unhappiness you're transmitting."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to. You know me too well."

"Well. . . . What's up?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter."

"It's your friend, isn't it? The director?"

"No."

"I bet it is."

"I'm telling you **NO!**"

"I'm telling you **YES!**"

"All right, *yes!*"

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"You broke up?"

"Yes. But that's not it. I knew it was going nowhere. It never mattered. You know that."

"I'm not surprised, if that's what you mean."

"I'm not surprised either. That's the funny thing, isn't it, Steve? We're never surprised."

"I guess not."

"I'm glad you came over. I just knew you'd understand."

And here we are again, fans. Home on the range. Replaying our favorite scene: Chris down and vulnerable.

Steve caring and supportive.

How this happened is beyond me. Three days ago I didn't even want to speak with her again. Now each of us is traveling on the same wavelength for the first time in weeks

Walking over to Chris, I put my arms around her waist. "Hey, come on," I say, lifting her chin with my hand and looking directly down at her. "You've got to cheer up. You're going to the Caribbean tomorrow. It won't do to have a sourpuss for the Breeze girl."

Chris smiles at me.

I smile back.

"Don't get any ideas," she warns, widening her smile.

And don't we know that look? That seductive, inviting, all-promising smile? It's been so many days since I've so much as felt any stirring from my gonads, it comes as quite a welcome surprise.

"I've got lots of ideas," I respond, trying not to sound too corny, before we kiss.

Chris gently pushes me away. "No, Steve. We can't. Just because I'm lonely is no reason. . . . It'll just make matters worse."

"Or maybe better."

"No, please. I'd just be using you."

"I'll take my chances."

"I can't do that to you."

"You mean you can't *not* do it."

We kiss again, until Chris once again separates us. "No, Steve," she says with less vehemency.

"Why not? I want to know."

"Don't ask me for the reasons, Steve. I don't know them."

"Fine. Come here."

And I am all over her.

And vice versa.

We start kissing and embracing and undressing and going at each other like old times. And it's fabulous. We're in the bedroom in a few minutes, having a tough time holding back, on the bed not long after that, and then minutes later, in the throes of yet another glorious encounter.

And you know what we have for you right now, here for our Eleventh Hour Number? Our Big Finish?

Nothing.

That's right.

Absolutely nothing.

The simple truth is it just ain't there.

Something's missing.

Not that Chris isn't trying.

She's as abandoned and committed as ever.

Not that I don't give it my all.

I do.

But it's gone.

And she knows it.

And I know it.

Even though we're both going wild, carrying on like it's the Fourth of July. And since neither of us cares to devastate the other by mentioning it, we just forge ahead.

Holding her tightly, working very hard, I try to summon that feeling again, wanting only to bring us back, at least for a few precious moments, to where we'd once climbed not so very long ago.

Going at it as hard as we can.

Trying to peak once more.

Trying.

Performing.

Acting.

Acting desperately to make it happen!

Once more.

Just one more time.

Please.

Once more.

For the road.

But the magic never comes.

The fickle chemistry which creates all the fireworks is simply not on for us.

This time, we're no longer making love.

This time we're balling.

Just doing each other.

Getting fucked.

Again.



## Chapter Fifteen

**BEEP! BEEP!**

No response.

**BEEP! BEEP!**

I honk the tinny horn of Roger's Mazda-cum-jalopy again. At last, the front door to Chris' apartment house opens, and she staggers out, weighted down by a heavy suitcase and an overnight makeup case.

Remembering our previous driving record to Vermont and not knowing what to expect, I've insisted upon giving ourselves a good hour and a half to get to the airport, affording us plenty of time for any of our customary, casual emergencies.

So, because we are prepared this time, naturally nothing goes wrong.

We arrive at the airport in twenty-five minutes, which must stand as some record in motoring annals, and I pull into the parking lot across from the Pan American terminal.

Checking in at the ticket counter is easy since we are so unexpectedly early, and once her luggage is tagged, we go to the cocktail lounge for a drink before departure.

"The tarot cards have been predicting nothing but good things for you, Steve," says Chris, sipping her Bloody Mary.

"Yes?"

"Yes. New beginning and productivity and success. Very positive readings."

"Good."

"And I keep coming up in your cards, meaning you've been thinking about me a lot."

"That's accurate. What do the cards say for you?"

"I gave up doing readings for myself."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I'm just going to let things happen."

"A very different approach for you."

"And about time, don't you think?"

"I don't know. Whatever you want."

"I've decided things will probably go a lot better if I start living for today instead of forecasting what might come tomorrow."

"Heavy-heavy!"

"Yes. My plans are very uncertain right now. I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"Good girl."

"I may give up acting for a while. Take a breather."

"And do what?"

"I don't know. Travel."

"Where to?"

"I'm not sure. Europe. Tangier. I've got a standing invitation to Majorca. Maybe the Orient. I just don't know."

"It's nice to have the freedom to do whatever you wish, huh?"

"I suppose. I mean if you're not miserable being pinned down by someone, you're miserable because you're alone."

"God, I hope it's not all that bleak."

"Believe me. It's that bleak. Perhaps I'll go to Argentina."

"And live with the Germans?"

"Yeah. Or maybe Tahiti. Mingle with the natives in some primitive fishing village."

"Sounds just like your cup of tea."

"I could start painting. Oils and acrylics."

"Good idea."

"Or sculpting. I always liked Louise Nevelson's stuff."

"All right."

"I think I'll give up sex, too."

"Yes?"

"Sure. Shave my head and get me to a nunnery."

"Don't do that, Chris. You'd only be wasting one of your greatest gifts."

"You're probably right. Maybe I'll marry some fabulously wealthy old count and quietly settle down in an eighty-room chateau on the Riviera, chockful of servants."

"I promise to visit every summer."

"Or poetry. I'll get a garret in Paris and live with several dozen kittens, all of us starving for our art as I write my nails off."

"I'd visit you in Paris also."

"How about China?"

"How about China?"

"Maybe I'll become a missionary. Establish a learning center like Ingrid Bergman in *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*."

"Courage, fortitude, conviction and a dedication to some higher ideal, huh?"

"You betcha!"

"I don't think you'd be happy doing that."

"Ingrid Bergman didn't mind."

"But that was a movie."

"So?"

"So life is not a movie. It's real."

"Reality, Steve, is at best a second-rate illusion. You're the one always expecting the curtain to go up wherever you are."

"I know," I say, taking a mock deep sigh.

Chris, putting her hands in the air, frames an imaginary title, announcing, "*Life Is a Seven Thirty Curtain!* by Steve Butler."

"*Life Is One Long Joan Crawford Movie!* by Chris Canaday," I retort.

"You want to hear something funny, though, Steve. I swear for years and years I was certain it would be that way. I thought sure there simply *had* to be a happy ending."

"You want to know something, Chris?"

"Shoot!"

"I know you'll think it's sappy, but in my own foggy way, I still think there may be one."

**"FINAL BOARDING FOR FLIGHT SEVEN AT GATE THREE!"** The announcement blares across the entire waiting area.

"Well, I guess that's it, then," says Chris, shrugging.

"Yeah," I answer. "Have a terrific time, you hear?"

"You bet!"

"Work hard."

"I will. Thanks for driving me here."

"My pleasure. That's what good friends are for."

"I'm glad we were able to visit before I left. It's almost like old times."

"Does *almost* count?"

"Sure does."

Taking her in my arms, we hug tightly. "Everything's gonna be okay," I foolishly try to assure her. "You'll see. Just like before."

"Come on," Chris asks firmly. "Who are we kidding?"

"Only each other," I answer, avoiding her eyes.

"Good-bye, Steve. I'll miss you."

"Take care."

Chris starts to walk away, and I yell to her, "Hey, kiddo! I still love you!"

Turning back to look at me, she smiles softly.

Then she is gone, lost in the bulk of the plane.

I rush over to the window to see if I can spot her. When I cannot, I race across the corridor, up the stairs out onto the observation platform. I run down to where her plane is warming up and keep walking along until I see Chris, sitting down at one of the front window seats.

She spots me, and I wave at her frantically.

The big jet starts turning around, heading toward the runway. I keep waving until I can no longer see her sun-drenched face smiling sadly back at me.

Standing there on the observation deck, I watch as the plane taxis down the runway. Even long after it disappears from view I remain fixed there, looking up at the empty sky.





# CURTAIN CALL



The following Wednesday afternoon I'm about to run from the house, already late for an Equity showcase audition, when the phone rings.

"Hello!" I answer abruptly.

"Steve Butler, please. Long distance calling from St. Lucia," says a fairly nasal operator.

Chris! How nice! "This is Steve Butler."

"Go ahead, please!" answers the operator, signing off.

"Steve Butler?" asks a voice.

"Yes."

"You don't know me. I'm Andrew Southern. We're down here in St. Lucia directing a Clairol commercial with Chris Canaday."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I'm afraid there's been an accident."

"What!"

"Are you two related?"

"No. Just friends."

"I see."

"What happened?"

"Well . . . it seems she's, um . . . she drowned."

A balloon filled with hot blood seems to burst inside my head, somewhere behind my eyes.

"What?" I ask, very bewildered, holding my forehead, trying to control this sudden shaking all over.

"Believe me, bud, we're all just as surprised as you. We only finished shooting here a couple of hours ago. We were

wrapping and she went off to take a swim. I don't know . . . she just went swimming and drowned."

"I don't understand . . ." I say, still shaking.

"They tried to save her. Tried to get her to breathe again, but nothing helped. She was so beautiful. . . . I'm sorry."

I have a million questions to ask, but I'm shaking so I can't manage to get one of them out.

He continues: "We looked through her things and found an address book in her room. All the names have been crossed out except yours and a Mrs. Mathews in Seattle."

"That's her mother."

"Oh. Her mother. I see. Do you think I should call her?"

"I really don't know."

"Do you know her mother, Steve?"

"No."

"Would you want to make the call?"

"I don't know. I guess. Sure. Give me the number."

I jot down the number and tell my friend the director I'll have Chris' mother call or I'll get back to him. Something. I don't know. Whatever. Nothing's making sense.

"Hey, um . . . I want you to know how really sorry I am about this," the director tells me. "I mean, it really comes hard to me, too. We had more than just a working relationship, you know."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She arrived here all gloomy, and so I was spending a lot of my off hours, um, you know, cheering her up."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. And she was fine. So I guess you can imagine how upset I am by all this."

"Yeah," I say, flat. "I'll get back to you."

Then I hang up.

Sitting down for a few minutes, I try hard to figure out just what the hell to do next. What's odd, though, is that while I want more than anything to be alone, I've also got this weighted urge to share this awful news. That somehow telling someone might somehow diffuse the pain and the incomprehension and maybe get me to stop shaking!

So I call Chris' mother in Seattle as promised, and that



turns out to be one of the worst experiences of my life. She cries, getting partially hysterical, demanding from me more information than I'm able to give. I start crying too while talking to her, the two of us on separate coasts, never having met or spoken before, united only by this common horrific impossibility.

Eventually, Mrs. Mathews and I both calm down and I get her to call Andrew Southern at the hotel in St. Lucia to make whatever arrangements she wishes.

Chris' mother and I speak several more times in the next few hours, following through with plans.

When it's finally worked out, she flies down to St. Lucia that evening, takes Chris' body back with her to Seattle the following day and buries her in the family plot on Friday.

I don't fly out for the funeral because . . . well, just because.

For what purpose?

To what end?

On Friday, the day of the funeral, the following letter arrives:

April

Dear, dear Steve,

I'm sitting here on the warm sand, looking out over the most beautiful beach.

I've just taken all the Valium I brought with me. Sitting here, waiting for the drug to take hold, before going for a long swim, I'm thinking of you, of course, and, since you probably already know by now, thought you deserving of some explanation.

But I don't know where to begin, really. In essence I'm too tired and too upset, too discouraged and too disappointed. I haven't the strength to fight my way back to feeling well again, so I've opted to check out for good.

When we arrived here, Andy started getting friendly again right from the start. I didn't want to go back to him. But I did. I don't know why. Loneliness, I guess. And it was awful. Mechanical. Cold.

Now that I'm away from the city, things are finally starting to come together. Collecting, focusing in my head.

And with this, of course, the very painful realization that if I could be so blind and cruel to you, the one man who never committed to anyone *but* me, then what's the sense of running after further futile relationships? This nagging sadness in the pit of my stomach gnaws and festers. It won't go away. I'm down, pained and terrified. I guess it's time to get off the treadmill.

Please understand I'm doing this alone, for myself, and for no other reason.

If you do one last favor for me, Steve, don't blame yourself! This is all *mine*. Always was. Wow. The first Valium wave just washed over me, and

I'm starting to feel a little tired. I want to address and mail this while still in control, so I guess I'll sign off for now. It's important you tell no one about this note. For my mother, our friends or anyone else who might be hurt by the truth, it's best they think I drowned, okay? I know I can trust you.

Well, Steve darling. The beach is lovely. The sky so blue and the sun quite strong.

I'm feeling very drowsy now. The water is warm and inviting.

Please understand.

Please enjoy for both of us.

Please go on.

I came to New York only to do a musical. I never expected this.

In my own, dumb, destructive way, for what it's worth, Steve, I love you.

CHRIS

So there you have it.

Disappointed?

Join the club.

Surprised?

Come on, not really!

I suppose I always knew it might lead to something like this.

Looking back now, I realize it was much like watching someone you love withering away with cancer and not knowing how to stop it.

My life has changed a lot since Chris' death. In the many weeks that followed I found myself walking around, confused, empty and disturbed, spending long, lonely hours asking myself redundant, impossible-to-answer questions.

When I realized this wasn't doing much for my social life, I started to see a shrink.

And we've had some fairly productive sessions, the doc and I. Very enlightening. I've learned a lot of things about myself I never knew before.

But you know what I really think?

I think it's all a lot of shit. Analysts set up codes of behavior for what they call normalcy, guides to happiness based on their scripts.

I'm glad I'm seeing him, though. He's gotten me to stop blaming myself.

A couple of other things have happened in the past few months.

I never did get the part of Alfred in *March into April*. At the last minute some kid fresh out of the Yale Drama School auditioned and wowed them so he got signed practically on the spot.

Dare I say, "That's Show Biz!"?

I've also found out what Chris meant when she spoke of that deepseated feeling of gnawing loneliness and abandonment, for I'm sometimes visited by this legacy of distress and let me tell you, it's a good thing these unwelcome knottings up don't hang around long because, believe me, they're no picnic.

And Ruth, my chubby, beautifully-ugly snoring wonder, checked out with a grand mal of her own, piling seizure upon seizure until even the doggy intensive care people couldn't bring her around anymore.

And I guess that's it.

No.

One more thing.

I still see Chris from time to time.

On television.

They've been running her Breeze spot a lot lately and I keep calling the agency and the stations, pestering to learn what the airing schedule might be.

I sit there, glued to the set for hours in maudlin anticipation, compulsively switching channels until I find her running along the beach in her bikini, coming into my bedroom for sixty captivating seconds of two-dimensional life.

Theater is really dead now in New York. Nothing going on. I'm getting a little tired of the city anyway. I think maybe I'll try Los Angeles for a while.

Maybe not.

I don't know.

For now, Harry and I are just going to hang out. Watch and wait. See what comes.

Chris walked offstage before the end of the show.  
Very unprofessional.















DAVID MARLOW was born in New York City in 1943. After graduate study at New York University, he moved to Hollywood and got a job in the United Artists Story Department reading scripts.

While in Los Angeles he directed eight regional theatre plays, including *The Odd Couple*.

At Twentieth-Century Fox he worked as assistant to the producer on the film of *The Great White Hope*.

In 1970 Mr. Marlow moved back to New York to head the United Artists Story Department. He wrote a weekly news column, has written for *New York* magazine and, as an actor, appeared in the comedy *No Hard Feelings*.

David Marlow now lives in New York. *I LOVED YOU WEDNESDAY* is his first novel.



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